

Will this Be the Century of the City? Let's not Miss it (Again)

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Will this Be the Century of the City? Let's not Miss it (Again)

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The new course of *Urbanistica*¹ has asked for a comment on the next Urban Agenda, precisely as international agencies are repeatedly proclaiming that the twenty-first century will be marked by the triumph of the city. Yet this triumph must be addressed cautiously. Cities have become a worldwide phenomenon, a belief shared by a few European Commission papers that place it at the core of the development strategies of the old continent. While the 'return' of the city has been celebrated for some time now, it is clear that European cities never really 'went' away. Moreover, they are rather dissimilar from those triumphing in the rest of the world. Why insist upon cities then? Why re-ignite expectations that were raised a long time ago, that fell through after a few disappointments and delays? In doing this do we not risk, feeding the "fog of amiable generalities"², so common when debating about the city?

This paper will offer an analysis of the urban dominant narrative, highlighting some of its weaknesses. It also seeks to assess the claim of the urban century from an Italian perspective, combining analytical and normative arguments for this purpose. In the following pages, some well-known yet unresolved issues will be discussed. These include: a) the peculiar institutional and geopolitical position of Europe; b) the configuration of the Italian settlements, and the features of an emergent urban question; c) the lost opportunity of the post-industrial transition and the still immature forms of property development. The conclusion considers the priorities of an urban agenda in Italy. Italy needs to identify the path of development that cities will follow, which will enable them to challenge and exploit the global economy to their benefit. In the pursuit of this goal, the specific characteristics of Italian cities must be kept in mind.

The European exception

The promise of an urban renaissance appeared relatively recently (Grogan and Proscio 2000; Rogers 2005), and as an idea it enjoyed extraordinary success, quickly infecting the entire world (Burdett and Sudjic 2008), it was much later before the first alarm was raised (Peirce et al., 2008), yet still, essentially taking a normative stance, it became the preferred exit strategy from the crisis (Katz and Bradley 2013). Europe's cities are significantly placed in the overall process of rescaling (Brenner 1999). As the world rediscovers the city after neglecting it for decades, cities in Europe occupy

1 I am grateful to the editorial board of *Urbanistica*, in particular to Paola Savoldi for her comments on a previous version of this paper.

2 As expressed elsewhere by Krieger (2009: quoting Sert on urban design).

a unique position. The same international politics now recognizes the urban arena as a favorable setting, mayors and local events are now center stage, although in a contradictory manner after the crisis of 2008 when a barrage of questions were thrown at nation states.

Though there is no doubt that cities matter today, as stated earlier such rediscovery has already been celebrated some time ago, indeed best practices and experimentations are already part of the manuals. Since the 90s, numerous studies have concentrated on the new patterns of urbanization (Hall and Hay 1980). This wave of research has brought about innovative concerns, such as new technologies (Graham 1994); or epistemological issues (Soja 2000); eventually conceptualizing new and innovative forms of urban coexistence (Martinotti 2001) and organization (Ascher 1995). Not surprisingly, the effects on the formation of the early EU policy agenda were progressively stronger (Parkinson 1992, CEC 1991). In Italy, a considerable number of studies have tried to deal with the impact of global issues on cities, such as the socio-demographic trends, the settlement form, the ratio of real estate investments, the local combination of spatial features of development and so forth. An original concern focused on the urban sprawl and the “città diffusa” (Indovina 1990), leading to the re-conceptualization of the internal change of cities (Perulli 1992) as well as the various ‘urban effects’ (Conti and Spriano 1990). Roughly thirty years later, only a few interpretative reviews are available that try to hold together all these different trends (Dematteis, ed., 2011).

Despite the few superficial similarities in the discourse about cities in Europe, and particularly in Italy, it differs significantly in substance in contrast to the rest of the world. Throughout the world, a new urban question regarding demographic expansion has arisen, which ranges from the basic needs for survival and the hope of increasing basic income by the poor. Such growth in income was mostly delivered by the informal sector, and raised extraordinary concerns about citizens’ rights, environmental sustainability and the need for formal policies. The latest neo-liberal development had the dubious honor, at terrible costs, of enlarging the number of countries that are now reverting to produce cities at a pace akin to that of an assembly line. National programs in China and India are aimed at creating networks of cities of over a million inhabitants. In India, new cities are planned in the vicinity of the 20 largest metropolitan areas (in addition to those already built since the 60s). In China, the government is preparing to offer urban accommodation to 300 million farmers by 2020, by planning an unprecedented connection of gigantic urban regions including several metropolises. Critics highlight the poverty of urban design (cities made of towers and highways), as well as the counterweight made of slums and shanties. Concurrently international agencies are concerned about the global issues of water consumption, desertification, food, pollution, health, and calamities.

From this perspective, Europe is a peculiar global region that corresponds to a geopolitical sphere, both (region and the sphere) built by cities even before nation states and today’s political cleavages coalesced. In fact, the interweaving of global geographical scales and historical perspectives characterize this region. The European urban network is an ancient one, widespread and composed of numerous cities of medium dimensions (features which are even more apparent in Italy). When addressing these legacies, scholars are compelled to enter into laborious details strongly referring to the historical specificity of local trajectories, and emphasizing the unprecedented parallel between institutional and spatial forms (Kazepov 2008; Le Galès 2006). A question still open is whether this continent has yielded to the neoliberal

turn or, on the contrary, it has somehow tamed the new mantras of the market and kept alive the traditional role of state and municipalities. No doubt that, compared to other global regions like the USA, the 'hollowing out' of the state is far from an accomplished task, and the welfare state resists in some sectors. This has been the European exception so far, one that has often been questioned by critics, that have found these concerns both limited and ambiguous. Finally, they are at risk because of the present weaknesses of the EU institutions, and the progressive marginalization of the European economy. Such political exception has had a direct impact on the EU urban policies. The growth of European cities is uneven, with some cities shrinking or declining. Because of the assorted processes of change, the thick network of cities changes in different ways. Both the shrinking and declining of cities support different understandings (Pallangst 2009) that rediscover distant causes and historical cycles. Thus, the Commission has often adopted narratives of growth and cohesion at the same time, thus contributing to the implementation of a rather mixed set of policies. Correspondingly, the EU policies focus mostly on the maintenance and the infrastructure (rather than on the expansion) of the urban network. Such policies are therefore aimed at the innovative regeneration of the economy during a period of prolonged stagnation. These are pursued through a mix of initiatives consistently assisted by the state, in particular by the local state.

Concerning Italy, both alternatives appear inadequate. The country has not consistently targeted either the growth or regeneration of its urban system. As various case-studies have shown, the picture is patchy and we lack a reliable system of assessment (Bricocoli and Savoldi 2010; Cremaschi 2009; Dematteis, ed., 2011; SGI 2009; Gabellini 2013). As suggested elsewhere (Cremaschi 2008), a hybridization process characterizes the Italian case, mixing traditional, modern, and postmodern policies as well as voluntary agreements. Though such a hypothesis would require a long discussion, it seems effective to explain the variety of initiatives taken by different cities (Cremaschi 2009), Genoa, Turin, Milan and Rome being the often quoted examples. Without paying attention to this mix of principles, it would be impossible to assess the variety of outcomes. In fact, strong doubts have been expressed about the consequences of the (mainly implicit) urban policies expressed so far by both cities and the state (Calafati 2009). This is especially the case if those outcomes result not from a coherent policy, but from the sum of contradictory and collusive actions. This becomes all the more true if we consider what is usually left out, for instance the case of the Italian urban decline. In fact, areas of structural decline require special attention, and perhaps non-conventional development policies (Cremaschi 2011). Why are Naples, Lamezia, Taranto and Gela (southern cities that are helpless in the face of inconclusive policies) not the priorities of a national urban policy? Is it not clear enough that urban policies went astray when led by the rhetoric of competitiveness, forgetting all those initiatives that should have fostered spatial cohesion?

This assembling of priorities is even more alarming when considering the surfacing of a new urban question (Donzelot 1999), and the increase of social inequality. An inequality that presents specific spatial cleavages in Italy, those within regions and cities, more than by neighborhoods (Cremaschi 2008). Besides, the increase of cultural differences clashes with the egalitarian policy of redistributing material advantages, taking on new spatially framed characters (Secchi 2011). The question therefore is that what are the cognitive infrastructures that would generate the proposals to be included in a national policy for cities? Where do ideas, reflections, assessments, and projects come from? As already considered in the debate on federalism, local development and metropolitan areas, too little attention has been paid to the agencies that should produce these strategies. The European Union has offered large positive

effects and some risks in this area. Today it would be risky to miss the growing gap between Italian and European cities due both to the crisis and to recent policies.

Who returns?

After almost fifty years, the exodus from the cities seems to be slowing down. Only in a few celebrated cases, like London or Frankfurt, the trend is inverted, though changes are limited and these cities can be considered as the exception rather than the rule. Since this process is less apparent in Italy than in the rest of Europe, it's worth clarifying certain crucial though not all-inclusive features.

First, not all cities are returning to prosperity or growing despite some short-lived declarations. In fact, according to the latest Urban Audit just two-thirds of the EU cities have shown a feeble demographic growth. However, the growth of population characterized less the cities than the metropolitan areas, which are often differentiated by a distinctive level of government. On the contrary, most Italian cities were in a consistent state of decline in the last decade³, including entire southern metropolitan areas.

Second, those who celebrate the return to the city, perhaps unwittingly, risk underestimating the extent to which cities have changed qualitatively. One of the most striking indicators is the residential sprawl⁴ that has reshaped the patterns of life and movement in metropolitan areas. In 90 per cent of EU urban areas, the population of the first and second belts has grown more than in the city centers. Office space and consequently jobs have been spreading since the 90s (Fareri 1991), a process that continues even now (Lang 2003).

Third, as often recalled by Glaeser (including recently in his 2011 work), cities attract the poorest people not because cities are inherently poor but because they offer them the opportunity to improve their standard of living. Aging and immigration impact differently but still have an influence on the social pact of welfare states⁵. Other forms of internal migration toward large cities is negative, with growth depending on international migrants (whose decisions to move have been affected by the crisis of 2008). Today, in most Italian cities, the rate of international migrants is more than twice the corresponding rate at the region level; while it doubles again in some neighborhoods. Recently, due to the lack of affordable housing and the financial crisis, the geography of migrants has changed again, increasingly involving small towns and areas that were previously in decline.

Fourth, innovations and conflicts raise problems of acceptance and opportunities. New social relations, along with rising prices of some goods, affect the cohesion of cities.

Though it is difficult to measure these phenomena, the social geography of cities appears to be increasingly polarized. The superimposition of social inequality and sprawl produces contradictory socio-cultural zoning: individuals in the dense city,

3 The core municipalities of the 11 metropolitan areas lost 3.6% of the population between 2001 and 2011, even more if compared with 1991 with the partial exception of Rome (and Turin to some extent). In the last few years, Milan, Bologna and Florence too gained a few new residents. However, municipalities in the first and second belts have compensated for the loss of the core city. The time has come to question whether these are two entirely different phenomena.

4 Italian sprawl differs from the mainstream process of predominantly middle class, white, spatially uniform suburbanization. Neither social nor physical conditions of the "diffuse city" are comparable to the Northern European or the US suburbs (Indovina et al. 2005; Gabellini 2013).

5 The number of aging households in need of personal assistance is still on the increase. If addressed by migrant caregivers living with those in need, the urban geography will change considerably with a decreasing spatial segregation, at the neighborhood level, and an increasing social distance. The policy of social 'mixité', for instance, will be dramatically affected (Fioretti 2011).

families in the open space of the diffused city. The city centers, traditionally replete with rich public goods and institutions, is home to the new “lonely crowd” of the elderly, migrants, tourists, and young professionals. Instead, families both rich and poor are relegated to the outer rings of the metropolitan area, where built areas tend to be more homogeneous and deprived of social services.

Finally, the latest changes in the urbanization process suggest that a new condition of ‘porosity’ characterizes those metropolitan areas resulting from the outcomes of both sprawl and agglomeration, along with the open land. Such variety emphasizes the conditions *in-between* (Sievverts 2001) and a syncretic approach to both the landscape and the built environment. This happens to the point that the image of an archipelago of distinctive urban regions and landscape units replaces that of the metropolis. It must be noted that within this configuration the spatial ordering of society starts to vanish. Precisely, the order that had endured at the core of the European identity since the Middle Ages, and that was based upon the coincidence of society and space, coupled with a single political system. As the comeback of cities is selective - only a few are involved and the dispersion process is massive - the sheer size of the sprawl changes even the geographic scales. Those who return are not the same cities, nor the same inhabitants. Slowly, the metropolitan language is adapting, rephrasing concepts like sprawl, density, coalescence, conurbation. Yet currently, the dominant celebratory narrative is unable to articulate the emerging differences.

Game over?

As of the end of the 80s, Italian cities saw a range of new constructions; universities, commercial centers, office towers, theme-parks and aquariums, foot bridges, railway stations, new residential neighborhoods and, to a lesser extent, technology and research laboratories. Such a list of new buildings adequately illustrates the intentions of the late (though implicit) urban policy. In fact, the urban landscape of the new service cities can be compared to the traditional administrative cities of the 50s. The signatures of star-architects have added little to the overall scheme. Builders, property developers, international finance, local governments and some technical centers were the protagonists in these years. They recycled the industrial areas hoping to revitalize the economic basis of cities through a rejuvenation of the built environment. This vision saw old factories giving way to new and more competitive service-oriented businesses, the real estate profits lubricating the transition, and the creative outcomes of the cross-fertilization between the knowledge economy and service industry would become apparent.

These were by and large the crucial agents of the post-industrial transition; a vague term, which refers to a series of innovations in all sectors. Conceiving that manufacturing would be replaced by the service sector (which is not what happened in many cities in northern Italy or in Germany, for example) has been a rough over simplification (mostly neoliberal, and geographically bound to Anglo-Saxon countries). Manufacturing has in fact resisted in most of the advanced economies, and the effects of this transition are still unclear. In particular urban manufacturing has been misunderstood, as shown by Milan’s plan in the 80s. Initially, the zoning of industrial areas seemed to guarantee manufacturing against the risk of redevelopment and relocation, probably an abstract and maximalist expectation. Soon, a reverse approach in zoning led to the complete redevelopment of the old industrial areas. If the first policy proved weak, the sudden rezoning had far too radical (and very little governed) outcomes.

Furthermore, later local integrated development projects and the few implemented urban strategies did produce the desired results and were often stifled by the weight of bureaucracies and patronage. Even in the most celebrated cases, it is difficult to reckon the added value of the strategic plan compared to the availability of investments. Turin and Genoa, for example, received significant private and public investments, the amount of which has never been clearly outlined or estimated, but is likely to be larger than the share of southern cities. Though larger funding does not necessarily lead to better achievements, it is often a crucial precondition. Today, the first critical assessments reckon that even the physical outcomes have not always been satisfactory (Bricocoli and Savoldi 2010), while there is an even greater concern regarding the lack of connection with the urban economic development. New technologies have repeatedly promised positive spillover effects (Neal 2012), as recently called for by the ministerial program on the Smart City for example, but the share of advanced services is still unsatisfactorily low (Cremaschi 2009).

Major cities have long justified the urban projects as opportunities to face international competition in a time of economic and ideological radicalization (Savitch and Kantor 2002). The projects of the last thirty years have in fact been interpreted as an expression of a specific neoliberal revanchism (Swyngedouw *et. al.* 2002), a strategy of internationalization based upon the imperative of competitiveness, the submission of urban development to the rules of entrepreneurship (Fainstein and Orueta, 2008), and the financialization of urban investments. The financialization of the market produced an excess of liquidity everywhere, inflating the real estate sector not mechanically, but with the complicity of banks and governments (Gallino, 2013). To what extent can these interpretations be applied to Italy? Given the variety of trajectories of the Italian cities, this announcement of a “single thought” of the neoliberal city does not fit all expectations. In particular, it neglects the neo-corporative vestiges of the local government, and the contextual hybridizations of policies. This raises in turn the peculiar problem of interpreting the urban housing markets during the last decades: have the liberalization of land development and financialization of real-estate driven urban investments? Or is it the intermingling of the traditional urban regimes with new partnerships (today critically revised with a certain alarm: Codecasa and Ponzini 2011; Sagalyn 2012), under a neoliberal narrative, a new urban regime has been forged by political elites, entrepreneurs and bureaucrats. This is an interpretative problem not sufficiently debated, not only in Italy. Finally it must be acknowledged that the historical event of the post-industrial transition has been regarded merely as a real estate opportunity, often with tricky results, while the regeneration of the productive basis has been overlooked. New buildings have been abstractly designed as mere office or residential spaces, without exploring the potential linkages with the new economy. Quite often, the old manufacturing provided the iconic references to the hasty romanticisation of the new building complexes. Ultimately, the industrial decentralization was a missed opportunity. The real estate actors invariably usurped the profits of redevelopment, and did not induce the change of the productive basis or the growth of advanced service activities. In the present crisis, most if not all these shining new urban episodes may soon become a desert of wrecks.

In conclusion

Three arguments have been advanced in this review. European cities are exceptional as is the EU framework for designing innovative policies. Both aspects help in clarifying some of the gaps of the Italian policy-making. However, the EU urban narrative is fraught with two misjudgments; firstly the rescaling process threatens the

historical coincidence of space, society, and politics at the core of the European cities, and secondly the specificities and priorities of the Italian urban network are underestimated. Finally, the last season of urban projects has *created more problems than* it has solved.

The first consequence of these arguments is that Italian urban policies, should they come out of the shadows, must assess a few crucial points: a) the hybrid and uncertain outcomes of previous initiatives; b) the diverging trends between northern and southern cities; c) some priority areas; d) the prospect of a worsening social situation. Urban policies should not borrow the rhetoric of competitiveness, and should instead pay attention to the peculiar characteristics and individual character of cities in our country. A likely guess is that the priorities of any urban agenda should concern the maintenance, regularization, and disaster recovery of cities rather than more ambitious but less affordable plans.

A further and more general consequence stems from the fact that both the political landscape and the patterns of action are truly mixed in this era. A crucial question concerns whether Italian researchers should polarize their interpretations of policies, or rather investigate the increasingly hybrid nature of the initiatives. If they do, then there are many avenues available for experimenting with new models of intervention. Many lessons have been learned thus far, and it is significant to note that many of these have been promoted by EU policies. That has been the positive outcome of the EU exception, and the EU has emphasized its experimental and multilevel policies for good reasons. The future will see which parts of Europe come out of the political crisis that has hit the continent, and if the positive features of the European exception will be repeated.

The implied argument is that Italy has been investing in the construction sector during the last thirty years, following the same policy as before, and failing to renew the economic base of cities (Calafati 2009). In either case, the great effort spent in innovating both the planning system and the development initiatives has not achieved the expected results (Palermo and Pasqui 2008). This gap is due to a deficit of strategic intelligence and planning on city development, namely the lack of a national policy aimed at supporting cities in planning long term initiatives (Dematteis, ed., 2011). These combined arguments suggest a negative assessment of the last season of urban regeneration initiatives: Italy lost a game season, spent mostly investing in real estate or planning ephemeral events.

In conclusion, cities are not simply 'returning' to the scene after the parenthesis of deindustrialization. Rather cities are realizing that the geographical rescaling and the change of production modes raises the challenge of creating a new economy. Expecting these cities to produce such a result relying solely on their own resources is unrealistic, particularly during a period when municipalities are operating with tightening budgets and local entrepreneurs are under pressure. However, both the prerequisites of national policies, and the nature of partnerships must be reviewed. If these elements had been at the core of the national urban agenda previously, we would already have witnessed a significant step forward.

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