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STRATEGIC PLANNING AS A FIELD OF PRACTICES

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In this paper I would like to discuss an hypothesis.

Beyond the appearance the dominant conception of strategic planning is still rooted into the rational comprehensive paradigm of planning. We have added sophistication. The consideration of the plurality of actors as a constitutive character of the process. The need to construct consensus among different subjects, the selectivity, the attention towards implementation, but still the idea is that of defining objectives and trying to design a set of actions which allow to pursuing them.

In the experience we have conducted in Milan from the beginning we have been induced to chose a different approach. We had not a strong power backing the plan. The Provincial Institution is quite weak. And within the weak institution the power of the politician in charge has been also not particularly relevant. A not well defined territory: we have been aware since the beginning that the territory of the Province is just an administrative section of an urban region which is in practice larger by any definition. Somehow we have been forced to adopt a much less linear approach.

This is characterized by an indirect connection between a structure of argumentation which indicates a direction and a possible evolution of the current situation and a set of actions which are tentative, experimental, at different levels and which try to push a very fragmented governance environment in the desired direction with various means.

This approach can define strategic planning as a field of practices rather than as a coherent sequence of coordinated actions.

My question is the following: is this way of conceptualizing strategic planning just the result of a series of specific circumstances or is this a fertile approach which could be more effective in coping with situations of fragmented powers and absence of a strong leadership in order to favor innovation and change?

In order to respond to this question I have first to describe the context and the planning process and then to link this to what I consider a relevant literature to discuss the issue.

1. The context

The starting point of this process was the request submitted by the Province of Milan to our University Department (Dept of Architecture and Planning at Milan Polytechnic) to develop a strategic plan.

In Italy we have a three-tier system of local government based on Regions, Provinces and Municipalities. In the specific case in question there is the Region of Lombardia, with about 9 million people, and a Province of Milan with about 4 million people distributed across 189 municipalities. Among these is the Municipality of Milan, which accounts about 1.2 million inhabitants. All three levels have statutory land-use or spatial planning powers, although the strongest powers remain those of the municipalities, which are responsible for land-use plans, and those of the regions, which are responsible for planning legislation; the

provinces, which are in charge of the Territorial Coordination Provincial Plans, are a rather weak link in the chain of land-use planning.

The new provincial government elected in June 2004 put forward the idea of developing a Strategic plan as an important point in its electoral programme. Accordingly, a specific political head of function “Assessore al Piano strategico” (Daniela Gasparini) was nominated by the President to take responsibility for the strategic plan.

The provincial government is formed by 15 “assessori”, each with different functions and heading different sectoral competences, with Territorial Planning, Mobility, Economic Development, Environment the most relevant in our perspective. The establishment of specific and separate responsibility for the strategic plan is a sign of political commitment and will. The strategic plan was intended to be something different from the statutory territorial plan.

It is important to reflect on the reasons for this choice. Strategic planning in Italy does not have formal recognition (Fedeli and Gastaldi, 2004). No planning law at the national or regional level defines or includes strategic plans among the planning tools. Nonetheless, in the last ten years in particular a fair number of Italian cities have promoted a strategic plan. Turin was the first, starting during the mid-1990s with a process which formed the basis for rethinking the potential of a former “one-company town” that had been hit by the crisis in the automobile industry (Ave, 2005). This was very much inspired by the experience of Barcelona, which was one of the first and most successful in Europe and was followed by Florence, Rome and many other medium-sized cities which are now linked into a “network of strategic cities”. Furthermore, in the north of Milan’s urban region some municipalities had got together at the beginning of the present century to develop a joint strategic plan as a means of coping with problems like infrastructure, transport and economic development, and also as a response to the image of external municipalities on the periphery of Milan.

These experiences spread the idea of strategic planning as an administrative innovation. A first reason for the decision by the Province of Milan was thus that strategic planning was considered as an innovative, proactive form of planning in the political communication. It is planning designed for action and development beyond the idea of planning as control which is linked to statutory territorial planning. And for the new centre-left coalition which had won a very uncertain electoral victory and wanted its activities to be seen as a fresh start for progressive policies, making a strategic plan was part of the picture.

I would add here that this all took place with no precise idea of what kind of strategic plan they wanted to promote. There were many different interpretations and expectations within the provincial government: the *Assessore* for Economic Development had in mind a plan centred upon infrastructure and new development poles; the *Assessore* for Territorial Planning was looking for the strategic vision which was lacking in the Territorial Plan inherited from the previous government. The others had less clear ideas and thought of an instrument to coordinate different sectoral policies. The ambiguity of the idea was not necessarily a problem, in so far as the design of the process would have been able to cope with different intentions and interpretations.

There is clearly a symbolic dimension to the decision to initiate a process of strategic planning and, as Edelman states, the symbolic value of a decision or a policy is deeply connected with its ambivalence (Edelman, 1985).

A second reason can be recognised in the fact that the Province, as stated earlier, is a quite weak level of government. Situated between strong regions and strong municipalities the Province, particularly in a situation like that of Milan with a big city at its core, has to conquer its political space. This does not result simply from the sum of its formal powers, which are fragmented and articulated in many fields of competences. The Province, a very old institution that historically precedes the Region, is responsible for the provincial road system, for providing infrastructure for higher education, for the production of a provincial territorial plan, for leisure and culture and for some other residual functions. It is quite clear that its powers are many and dispersed, and also that in any specific field of public action they are not so crucial because there are other prevailing powers situated above or below the provincial level.

A general choice of the current government has been to present its programme as the “Province of municipalities” rather than a higher government body above the municipalities. The slogan was intended to underline the intention of looking for the source of power not in the limited areas in which the Province could impose its decisions over other actors, but on the contrary in an institution which is at the service of municipalities, to help them in dealing with the many problems that go beyond their individual capacity. The President has long experience as mayor of one of the biggest municipalities in the urban region, and many of the assessori have experience of having been directly elected mayors. In the context of the relationship with other actors and with the municipalities, a particularly weighty problem is that of the relationship with the municipality of Milan. Historically, though particularly in the last 15 years, one of the main limits to the provincial government capacity has been the conflict with Milan. Not being able to cooperate or to obtain cooperation from the municipality of Milan, the provincial government has been the government of a territory with a “big hole” in the middle. But since most of the problems have their cause or effect in the core city, this difficult relationship turned out to be a potent weakness of the provincial power.

The strategic plan is therefore seen as a tool to engender new relationships with other levels of government, with municipalities and particularly with Milan; as a governance experiment which could give more strength to the Provincial government for its capacity to cooperate, not to impose decisions in residual areas.

We can conclude here that in the specific situation the decision to prepare a strategic plan was linked to many concurrent reasons: for the ambiguity of its content, for the image of innovation attached to its symbolic value, for the interactive character of the process of its preparation, for its open nature.

These contextual factors gave us a strong responsibility in designing a planning process that could be appropriate in the specific situation because, as Albrechts suggests (Albrechts, 2004), “strategic spatial planning is not a single concept, procedure or tool ... it is a set of concepts, procedures and tools that must be tailored carefully” to the specific situation. And this is what we have attempted to do.

Another important contextual factor has been the significance of the provincial border in devising effective policies for the urban region of Milan. What was the territory that we had to consider in order to handle things at an adequate scale? In recent years many voices had raised the issue of the growing interdependency of an ever wider territory in the central part of the Lombardy region (Lanzani, 1991; Secchi, 2003; Balducci, 2004). This area had been described as the “Infinite City” (Bonomi and Abruzzese, 2004) a post-metropolitan region, which creates space for the building of new territorial relationships.

Comparing current images of this area with those of 30 years ago it is all too evident that a deep process of restructuring has happened: firstly the urban region of Milan, even physically, now goes far beyond not just the Municipality but also the Province of Milan, and if we want to catch the territorial phenomena at an adequate scale we probably have to consider as a minimum a region that includes ten provinces belonging to three different institutional Regions. Secondly, this expanding urban region is composed of conurbations which appear to have their own territorial form, not just as a result of a sprawl effect of Milan.

This territorial feature is confirmed by population trends: the ten provinces that are totally or partially included in the urban region have an overall population of almost 8 million people, which has overall undergone moderate but continuous growth in the last 20 years (1981-2001), in which the loss of population from the core city and the Province of Milan (-3.4%) has been offset by significant growth in the surrounding provinces of the north – Como (+5.1%), Lecco (+8.7%), Varese (+3.1%), Bergamo (+11.3%) – and the nearer south, Lodi (+10.4%).

Even with a very simple observation of territorial phenomena, we can say that in the recent period we have seen (a) a growth process of many external areas pushed by the strength of Milan but also by a significant autonomous attraction capacity; (b) the relocation from the city of Milan of populations which belong to different social groups; (c) the localisation of new metropolitan functions in the field of commerce, production and leisure in this enlarged urban region, giving rise to a new and integrated geography of development.

Furthermore, it can be said that this area altogether also has strong relations with other more distant poles like Turin and Genoa in the west and Brescia and Verona in the east, with which it forms what Peter Hall has called a Mega-City Region (Hall and Pain, 2004). According to Hall and Pain a Mega-City-Region is formed by “series of anything between 10 and 50 cities and towns, physically separate but functionally networked, clustered around one or more larger central cities, and drawing enormous economic strength from a new functional division of labour. These places exist both as separate entities, in which most residents work locally and most workers are local residents, and as a parts of a wider functional urban region connected by flows of people and information carried along motorways, high-speed rail lines and telecommunications cables” (Hall and Pain, 2004: 3).

The implications of these tendencies pointed us in two different directions. First, with the objective of designing a strategic plan for the Province we had to be aware that the Province is just the core part of a large urban region which in turn is part of a mega-city region. This should be reflected in the design of the planning process. Second, within its boundaries we cannot consider the Province of Milan as a coherent territory which can be interpreted only along a linear relationship between the core city and its periphery; the Province itself is a polycentric region in which new territorial aggregations going beyond institutional borders of municipalities are physically and socially visible.

In this area, as already mentioned, in the last ten years there have been instances of coordination between municipalities with the aim of coping with inter-communal problems and promoting new, more significant territorial identities; these processes are yet to be sustained by some form of institutional recognition. The strategic plan could be part of this process of recognition, bringing these bottom-up experiences into the realm of governance practices (Healey, 2004; 2007).

2. The planning process

Given that the Province is not a city, but rather the core of the Milan urban region, right from the start we discarded the consolidated and successful model used for Barcelona, Lyon and Turin, where the strategic plan was based on the idea of the city as a unitary actor. The Milan urban region does not have a single institution with the authority to take decisions over an area where there is a thick web of overlapping jurisdictions. Nor did we consider it useful to invest energy in trying to establish an authority for the city region as had been done many times in past attempts to plan the metropolitan area (Balducci, 2003). This, in the light of what I have illustrated so far, would in any case be partial and insufficient. Wherever the boundary is traced, it would be crossed by phenomena now or in the near future, given the strong integration already occurring at the level of the mega-city region. From this perspective the only viable alternative to the establishment of a jurisdiction is to foster cooperation between existing actors with their powers, trying to influence their choices rather than impose choices from above. It is what has been described as the evolution of urban leadership from “power over” to “power to influence” (Hambleton, 2007) in complex governance contexts.

If we shift our viewpoint in this direction we can see on the one hand that the flexibility of the boundaries is not a problem and should be turned from a possible weakness into a strength; and on the other hand that while for a statutory territorial plan it is almost impossible to conceive of this kind of flexibility, the open nature of the strategic plan is particularly appropriate to serve a more enabling, proactive and experimental process (Hillier, 2007). Of course this adds complexity to the already complex situation and makes it necessary to conceive of the strategic planning process as a “field of practices” rather than as a set of rules or a precise sequence of actions.

We therefore designed a planning process in which the Provincial government was to act as the promoter of a cooperative effort intended to prevent the tendencies towards fragmentation of the population and of its territory and to support the valorisation of its assets.

In order to emphasise the difference between this and other strategic planning processes, we decided since the beginning to call it a “strategic project” rather than a strategic plan. 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.

Secondly, we immediately began working on the production of a new vision for the area. We wanted to bring in all the research work we had been doing on the urban region, leading to a synthesis, a new description of the area capable of making all the actors aware of the ongoing profound transformation processes; offering new representations which recognised the main trends, the internal articulation of the area and the development trajectories; a constitutive communicative action in a situation in which all the traditional descriptions appeared to be outdated.

The commission given to the OECD by the *Assessore* for Economic Development to conduct a Territorial Review of metropolitan development helped us because it made clear a kind of division of labour between their focus on the fundamentals of regional economy and the associated governance problems, and our focus on the more general challenges

imposed by the spatial change of the urban region. We saw the two strategic activities as complementary, as they effectively have been.

Our starting point was a highly selective hypothesis: the welfare of the urban region - the wellbeing of its inhabitants but also, indirectly, the competitiveness of its economy - is linked in Milan not to the expansion of infrastructure or to big projects, but rather to its capacity to achieve greater *liveability*: the recovery of a compromised environment, the overcoming of difficulties that emerge in the daily life of individuals and businesses, which are the consequence of the strong economic development of the past. This is today the most important limit to further development and the strategic project must aim at promoting a city region that is more comfortable, more friendly towards its inhabitants and businesses, which is capable of rediscovering its environmental quality, which is capable of preventing social exclusion because it deals with the housing problem and the provision of services for the dynamic population that cannot afford the prices asked by the market.

We called this multi-dimensional notion of liveability *habitability*, with the aim of introducing a term which is not in common use and which might therefore raise public awareness of the general objective of the planning process.

We wanted to underline the fact that for the first time in the history of Milan's urban development, the problem of habitability is affecting citizens and businesses at the same time. We know in fact that new production does not have to take place in functionally and technically separate places, and above all that the development of the economy needs a city which on the one hand is attractive to high-quality workers and on the other hand is "*a place for accumulating creative capital, a complex system of interactions between companies, risk capital services, media, informal economies, private and public institutions, artists' communities, associations, social networks, the diffusion of know-how, cultures*" (Dematteis, 2005). The city, the urban region, as the habitable territory which is capable of hosting these rich interactions.

We defined the habitability theme in six different ways:

1. Residing: finding a stable or temporary home, improving the common spaces and the connections with the public space, welcoming new populations;
2. Moving and breathing: moving by different means, in different directions, finding comfortable waiting spaces for public transport, reducing congestion and pollution;
3. Space sharing: connecting people in new public spaces of different types, ability to find silence to slow down the frantic pace of life, creating excitement in other places, allowing space for unplanned activities, bringing back nature where it has disappeared;
4. Making and using culture: promoting culture in various places, stimulating institutions to engage in dialogue with informal producers of arts and creative culture, sustaining their networks;
5. Promoting new local welfare: supporting voluntary actions and solidarity actions, boosting citizen participation, promoting social services for people facing difficulties;
6. Sustaining innovation: attracting new talents, developing a policy for human capital, creating a new responsibility for business vis-à-vis the local community in which they operate.

This multi-dimensional definition of liveability tries to describe the field of activities that we propose as the components of the strategy. To identify these practices it is necessary to look at the processes of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation which affect the heart

of the urban region: on the one hand we can see the emergence of “distance communities” (Amin and Thrift, 2001), communities of activities, populations relating to each other through new network connections without being rooted in a specific territory: students, immigrants, commuters, groups of young people with common interests in music, sport, etc.; all those groups who challenge the traditional relationship between community and place. On the other hand we can see new territorial rooting processes which link inhabitants not only (or no longer) to municipal boundaries but to significant wider areas, such as North Milan, Brianza, Alto Milanese, Adda Martesana - areas which the development of mobility has strongly integrated, where we have seen cooperation develop between municipalities. Strengthening these relationships is the objective in proposing the image of the “City of cities” as an essential part of a description orientated towards the project.

It is an interpretive image which allows us to say that these conurbations which are found on the maps are not just concentrations of urban development, but can become rich histories of cooperation between communities, enabling them to face problems which go beyond their individual capacity, from environmental protection to land use, or the management of complementary services.

In this sense they are “cities”. Milan, city of cities, is an image that can help public, private and third sector parties to work towards creating better habitability.

Starting from this set of argumentations we conceived different streams of action. The entire process was intended to be quite compact in terms of time and marked by a series of products (strategic document, project atlas and the final version of the plan) and events (conferences, forums, exhibitions and workshops) which it was hoped would bring the plan out of the laboratory and into the city region.

The project was broken down into a series of steps that together were designed to activate a strategic planning process. The beginning of the project was represented by a Strategic Document entitled “*City of cities, a strategic project for the Milan urban region*” (Provincia, 2006) presented as part of a public initiative in February 2006: a sort of White Paper on the themes of change in the urban region, rich in data and information which launched the theme of habitability and presented the vision and the strategy. The second move was to initiate a *call for projects and good practices* which could contribute to the improvement of habitability in the Milan urban region (Provincia di Milano, 2007a). The idea of the competition was borrowed from a well-known European experience, that of IBA Emscher Park, which as a planning strategy used the innovative means of a project competition, through which a series of plans were selected and then guided to realisation. In our case, too, we received a huge response from Milanese society: foundations, universities, associations, individual or joint communes, non-profit organisations and private citizens all participated. At the end of a two-stage process of selection we had 259 definitive proposals for good practices and project ideas which covered all the facets of habitability indicated above and which portrayed a local community that was not only rich and lively but was also keen to enter into a relationship with institutions in order to contribute to the development of relevant public programmes.

The third move was the preparation of an *Atlas of policies and projects for habitability in the Province of Milan* (Provincia di Milano, 2007b), the result of a dialogue with the other 14 *assessori*, delegated advisors and their managers. This was on the one hand an exercise in self-reflection and reciprocal internal information within the Provincial structure

and across the sectors, and on the other hand an exercise in external communication and information about what the Province is already doing in the field of habitability: 52 projects and policies which can build another network of projects and policies, which in turn interface with the network of projects and practices coming out of the competition.

The fourth step was the launch of a limited number of *pilot projects* which were designed to intervene in particularly relevant areas such as the realisation of a peri-urban woodland and the trying out of innovative policies for housing access, or a project for upgrading production spaces (Provincia di Milano, 2007c) .

The fifth step was an exhibition organised at the *Triennale di Milano*, a nationally and internationally recognised permanent institution for the promotion of planning, architecture and design. The exhibition was held in the period May - July 2007 and provided information about the changes in the Milan urban region to a wider audience (10,000 people visited the exhibition) and translated the objectives of the project into a communicative language. It was jointly supported by the Province, the Municipality of Milan and The Chamber of Commerce. The lay-out had at its core the "City of Cities Theatre", a meeting place where for two months an uninterrupted series of initiatives were held to construct, both literally and metaphorically, an arena in which people and decision-makers could meet and discuss the future of the urban region.

The final step of this first phase was the presentation in June 2007 of a *final document* entitled "For the habitable city. Scenarios, visions and ideas" (Provincia di Milano, 2007d) in which all the streams of action initiated in the planning process were presented at the conclusion of this first phase to illustrate what had been achieved at the different levels and what the project aims were for the future.

3. Interpreting strategic planning

Starting from the second half of the 1980's it has been quite influential a conceptualisation of strategic planning as a new "developmental decision science" (Bryson, 2004, pg.207) which tried to respond to the need of finding new non hierarchical modes of planning (Bryson and Roering, 1987; Bryson, 1988), to deal with an uncertain future and to be able to provide an approach capable of "planning under pressure" (Friend & Hickling, 1987). The need to move from a traditional planning approach (based on a top-down and single-actor centred activity of comprehensive planning, an un-contested use of technical knowledge and a linear concept of time and space) has found promising materials to deal with the uncertainty and complexity of contemporary world, in the tradition of private sector strategic planning, based on of a predefined sequence of operations - (a) initial agreement, (b) stakeholders dialogue, (c) swot analysis, (d) definition of the vision, (e) strategy formulation and (f) listing of actions (Bryson and Roering 1987) .

As a matter of fact a wide European and American literature is available to show that a strategic approach could imply and allow different perspectives on planning. One which does not refer to the dimension of *strategy just in terms of instrumental rationality* in order to reduce and treat complex situations, but rather as one *able to explore the possible advantages of dealing with (anticipating, but most of all playing with) the multiple and interacting actors behaviors (and agencies) which situations propose.*

Actually what seems in fact to be a stake, and leading a possible and necessary "inquiry on" planning through the eyes of a strategic approach, is the wider crisis of the general

framing of public action underlying planning processes. Some of the keywords of planning are in fact losing their consolidated meaning and are stressed by the changing landscape of contemporary society (Albrechts). A contemporary society in which individuals are characterised by the fading of a “life project”, replaced by the emergence of a life “based on projects” (Baumann). A society in which, living in a logic of “here and now”, individuals seem obliged to live in a sort of continuous contraction of their time horizon, where both past, present and future become fluxes of actions inside which the possibility of sense making is more and more reduced. At the same time they are exposed to the necessity of dealing with coexisting, often conflicting, different visions of the world (and interests and identities): obliged to go continuously from one frame (of action and thought) to another, in a uninterrupted “adjustment” which happens through every day multiple practices they are part of. This recurring exposure to the other can be conscious and able to produce frame reflection, but can also produce a life made of episodes not related one another, where the capacity to recognize and to make sense of them is very limited. Both these facts result in a growing need of consolidation, rather than innovation: routines in fact reduce the difficulty and complexity of everyday life and the uncertainty to which people are exposed. But the fall of great narrations, the progressive reduction of spaces of projects and innovation affect not just individuals, but also institutions, traditionally specialized in “planning the future”, in sense-making, as well as in making projects and promoting innovation and developing new (codified) solutions to problems. Words as *governance culture*, *time- space horizon*, *project*, *innovation* are becoming therefore problematic for them: how can they deal with *projects*, when *time horizon* is always more contracted and uncertain? Which spatiality they have to look through, in a world of continuous inter-scalar situations? How can they develop a *culture of governance* when their life is more and more constituted by *episodes and events*? How can they produce shared visions and activating *sense-making* having to deal with the multiplication of frames and perspectives? How can they look for *innovation* when there is a growing need of consolidation of routines, in order to reduce the uncertainty and the necessity to deal with a vague world (Callon, Lascoumes, Barthe, “*Agir dans un monde incertain*”)? How can they take care of the future, when future cannot even be thought?

Several authors have been more or less recently trying to dig out strategic planning as a field of practices able to elaborate answers to these questions: the lessons of Charles Lindblom in the seventies are now not so far from those of scholars like Patsy Healey (2004 and 2007), Louis Albrechts, Klaus Kunzmann, Jean Hillier (2008) or Bruno Dente (2008). They all offer relevant contributions to planners interested in bringing together an approach to the strategic dimension different from the Bryson’s perspective, and as we will see at the end of the paragraph linked with some significant Lindblom’s intuitions at the same time with a general *bouleversement* of the classic planning *rationale*.

- *Strategic plan making: connecting knowledge resources and relational resources*

In her several critical case accounts and reflections on planning and strategic planning, Patsy Healey, proposes in this sense to stress the “relational nature” of strategy-making, involving “connecting knowledge resources and relational resources (intellectual and social capital) to generate mobilisation force (political capital) (Healey, 1998; Innes and Gruber, 2005). Such resources (capital) form in institutional sites in governance landscape which, if a strategy develops mobilisation power, become nodes in networks from which a strategic framing discourses diffuses outwards. The strategic frame travels as an orientation, a sensibility, a focus for new debates and struggles, performing different kind of institutional

work in the different arenas in which it arrives” (pg.198, Urban complexity and spatial strategy, 2007). At the same time strategic spatial plan-making (...) is “about building new ideas and about building processes that can carry them forward. (...) A social process, rather than a technical exercise, (which) seeks to interrelate the active work of individuals, within social processes (the level of agency) with the power of system forces-economic organisation, political organisation, social dynamics and natural forces (the level of structure of social relation”(...). It recognises that strategic spatial plan making, although occurring within a context of powerful structuring forces maybe used by social groups to create structure and frameworks through which to influence the flows of events that affect them (25-26, 1997, Making Strategic Spatial Plans: Innovation in Europe). This is probably one core hypothesis about the strategic approach, based on the role of knowledge and relationality within a structured field of action, in a social, political, and cultural constructivist perspective.

- *Multiple rationalities*: dealing with future, legitimacy and action.

Louis Albrechts, trying to bridge the gap between theoretical reflection and practical experimentation and to escape from a mechanical view of strategic planning affirms that effective strategic planning must be able to work at four different levels. The four tracks he proposes are:

- producing a long-term vision
- allowing immediate actions
- reaching the relevant stakeholders
- trying to reach public opinion.

“The four-track approach is based on interrelating four types of rationality: value rationality (the design of alternative futures), communicative rationality (involving a growing number of actors – private and public – in the process), instrumental rationality (looking for best way to solve the problems and achieve the desired future), and strategic rationality (a clear and explicit strategy for dealing with power relationships)” (Albrechts, 2004: 752).

These four types of rationality are a great challenge to the consolidated rationality of planning, implying new ways to look at the future, to think about efficacy and action, to deal with projectuality and governance. *At the same time* this is a way of ordering the most relevant aspects of a strategic planning process without fixing them in a set of rigid rules. It is an approach capable of clarifying, in pragmatic terms, what we understand in theory reflecting upon the contribution of Lindblom or Healey.

- *Strategic plans as open fields of experimentation and investigation: new maps of potentialities*

Jean Hillier, in her recent book (Hillier, 2007) states that “strategic spatial planning should not involve the adoption of pre-determined solutions, but might offer a ‘genuine possibility’ of experimentation (Houle, 2005: 93) for actants to ‘internally generate and direct their own projects’ (Guattari, 2000: 141, cited in Houle, 2005: 93) in direct relevance to their own specific understandings and problematic”. Hillier develops a reflection on a *multiplanar theory* (Hillier, 2007) one “which explores the potential of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of emergence or becoming as a creative experimentation in the spatial. These notions allow unexpected elements to come into play and things not to quite work out as expected. They allow me to see planning and planners as experiments or speculations enmeshed in a series of modulating networked relationships in circumstances at the same time both

rigid and flexible, where outcomes are volatile. Where problems are not 'solved' once and for all but are rather constantly recast, reformulated in new perspectives". She therefore proposes "that strategic spatial planning be concerned with trajectories rather than specified end-points. I regard spatial planning as an experimental practice working with doubt and uncertainty, engaged with speculation as adaptation and creation rather than as scientific proof-discovery: a speculative exercise, a sort of creative agonistic. I suggest a new definition of spatial planning along the lines of the investigation of 'virtualities' unseen in the present; the speculation about what may yet happen; the temporary inquiry into what at a given time and place we might yet think or do and how this might influence socially and environmentally just spatial form (Hillier, 2007)". In this perspective she argues on the one side about the possibility of planning to be more inclusive, democratic, open and creative, made upon improvisation, based on performance rather than on a normative/prescriptive dimension "concerned with 'journeys rather than destinations' and with establishing the conditions for the development of alternatives. This would be a pragmatic approach in which 'policy plugs into production, and production into policy' (Wise, 2006: 191; 2002: 230). It would be bureaucratically and politically unsettling and 'risky', for, as Wise (2006: 191) explains, 'it will not only apprehend the probability of 'opportunities that are unforeseen', but simultaneously anticipate the movements of the city and accept that policy outcomes are experimental and unpredictable'" Starting from this hypothesis she proposes a fascinating reflection on the activity of mapping practiced in strategic planning as explorations of potentials (in space-time-actors relations...).

- *Governance culture and governance episodes*: new limited but practicable paths of sense-making.

From a convergent perspective Patsy Healey again looks at the way in which strategic (spatial) planning is able to help specific episodes of social or institutional innovation to be absorbed into more stable governance practices and can eventually 'travel' into different contexts to re-shape the dominant governance culture. Working through what Lindblom defines actions of probing (Lindblom 1990) rather than "planning" in a traditional way, one can find a new way to penetrate governance processes and sediment into governance culture. Making governance episodes parts of a wider sense-making process, apparently weaker of the great narrations of the past, Healey offers an insight into what Lindblom calls a strategic planning approach and explains how it is possible, dealing with complex governance problems, to introduce relevant changes and thus working on innovation in even starting from alterations at the margin (Healey 2007), as well as from routines.

- *Rethinking efficacy*: governance as an open and complex key issue, rather than a pre-fixed model

With Dente, among many other arguments which could be raised and discussed (i.e. the relevance in a strategic approach of dealing with the issue of time intersecting long term and short term), we can agree that also the issue of evaluation of planning (assessing outcomes, also unexpected ones) is to be completely reframed in a strategic planning perspective. The efficacy of strategic planning has in fact to deal with dimensions difficult to be verified and quantified: as the changes in actors' behaviours, trust, attitude to cooperation, density of network, complexity of projects and issue afforded. In this sense, since, quoting Perulli, strategic planning has to deal with the capacity of identifying issues, rather than objectives to be pursued; to produce discontinuity rather than fostering routinary evolution; making out possible courses of action, rather than a generic desirable future. Hence its efficacy cannot be simply evaluated through a predefined monitoring

model, inside a traditional programming convention. We have instead to develop a sort of continuous process of discussion of the core hypothesis of the plan and their operative declination; this is particularly true, states Dente, if strategic planning is able to renounce to the idea of the public actor as the main and only actor of the plan. Both in the case that one of the issues of the plan is the difficult reconstruction of a collective actor (a strong dense coalition), both in the case in which the plan has already given up with this possibility and can only count on and look for inclusive but open and hetero-direct processes of vertical and horizontal cooperation, states Dente, governance is at stake and is the filtering concept for the evaluation of the efficacy of a plan: to what extent the plan has been able to produce governance changes, becomes the issue to be evaluated. But in the first the plan runs after a predefined aspiration (an ideal model), in the second the process remains open to uncertainty and evaluation is central to feed a recursive process of probing. This has a further consequence: in the first case it is assumed that a clear coalition, based on a assumption of reciprocal responsibilities, can play a steering collective role, more or less simple to be evaluated. In the second, which abandons from the very beginning the possibility to isolate the subjects from the situations in which they act, the steering role should be played by an actor autonomous from all the other ones involved, able to evaluate the situation and its transformation.

- *Interaction, going beyond a linear relation between actions and effects, plans and outcomes.*

If we now get back to Charles Lindblom, the author in an insufficiently known essay about planning, in which he compared conventional planning with what he calls “strategic planning”, held that it “is a method that treats *the competence to plan as a scarce resource* that must be carefully allocated, not overcommitted.... It is planning that picks its assignments with *discrimination*, that employs a variety of devices to simplify its intellectual demands, that makes *much of interaction and adapts analysis to interaction...*” (Lindblom 1975, 41). And furthermore “...Strategic planning is then systematically adapted in several specific strategic ways to interaction processes that take place of analytical settlements of problems of organisation and change...Strategic planning plans the participation of the planners (or of the government for which they plan) in interaction processes, rather than replacing the processes... Strategic planning tries to make systematic use of the intelligence with which individuals and groups in the society pursue their own preferences by molding their pursuit, rather than substituting the planners’ intelligence wholly for individual’s or groups’...Strategic planning attempts to develop and plan, in the light of, a rationale for deciding which effects are to be achieved through decision and which only as epiphenomena” (ibidem 44-45). This approach is full of practical implications for both planners and institutions: on the one side we have to be aware as planners, and to convince our “clients”, of the limited possibilities we have to influence the present and the future, of the necessity to be discriminatory, notwithstanding the stronger appeal of the rhetoric of the omnipotence which is pervasive in planning and policy fields. Particularly in complex systems we have to value interaction as a form of analysis and to use planning as a support for social practices rather than as a substitute for them. We have to understand and to look for the “intelligence of society”. We have to include in our consideration intended and unintended possible effects. For institutions this implies to adopt a ‘modest’ approach to planning, which tries to reduce the anxiety of dealing in a comprehensive way with an uncertain and plural world, refusing a linear and causal perspective between actions and effects, plans and outcomes, ends-means, looking at circumstances not as frictions, but as occasions, being open to take advantage from the situation, to recognise and develop its **potential**, rather than fighting heroically against it.

- *Potentialities and transformation, rather than action and outcomes*

These positions are not far from those we can find in a more recent book by the French philosopher and Sinologue Francois Jullien (*Pensare l'efficacia in Cina e in Occidente*, 2006, original title...), which offers an interesting contribution in an activity of defining the specificity of a strategic approach. His position is based on a twofold operation of distance-setting: distance from the modern conceptualization of planned actions by referring to the eastern world as well as distance between the western classical thought and the modern one. According to Jullien in fact, there is a wide distance between the western-classic approach to the concept of strategy and the oriental (Chinese) one (more similar to the pre-classical greek culture): looking at the first through the eyes of the second, he suggests, can help deconstructing the western approach and individuating both its weaknesses and strengths.

In the western classical and then modern perspective, according to Jullien, "efficacy" has been thought and theorized as passing through a necessary process of modeling, of producing plans in the perspective to deal with pre-fixed objectives. The plan precedes its application, its implementation, and has to deal with, on the one side the intellectual dimension of the production of the ideal form of action, on the other with the will, which defines the engagement of the individual in getting inside the reality and making the plan work. The distance between theory and practice characterizes the ancient Greek classic approach which has been influencing western contemporary thought: a distance occupied and produced by occurring circumstances which deviate theory and plans, from practice and reality (generating the same friction that one can feel walking inside water rather than on the simple ground quoting Clausewitz). Leaving behind the pre-classic *metis*, in Jullien words (the Greek word indicating the capacity to take advantage from circumstances, of seeing the situation evolving, in order to catch the favorable evolution), the classic Greek thought stands far away from the Chinese approach. Which indeed, with Sun Tzu and Sun Bin, according to Jullien, underlined the importance for the strategist to start from the situation, not a one that could be modelled, but from the specific and unpredictable one inside which he happens to be thrown, trying to discover its potential and how to make use of it. In this sense the "potential of the situation" rather than the plan (and the will of the strategist) is relevant, and circumstances cannot be regarded as just producing frictions. Thus rather than about objectives one should talk about advantages that can be taken from a situation. In spite of dealing with the couple ends-means, the Chinese perspective use a word similar to the french 'agencement': since strategy can be looked as the capacity to find all the favorable elements which can be developed in a situation in order to take advantage of it (pg.37-39) there is no use of reasoning and acting in the light of finalities. No outcome can be expected; or better just indirect ones, since the situation rather than the subject determination is central. This means also that action has to be thought in another way: Jullien suggests hence to use the word "transformation" (within a process perspective), rather than action (related to a product perspective. Where occasion is central, the causal implication of the "effect"/outcome is rejected, far from the process in which it is strictly embedded. Therefore efficacy cannot be else than indirect in relation to the attended aim. At the same time, whereas subjectivity is fading, strategy becomes indirect and modest, anti-heroic. It is not so difficult to see what interrelate Lindblom to Julienne and how the approaches to planning proposed by Albrechts, Healey, Hillier try to cope with the challenges proposed by the first one.

4. Reflecting upon the provisional results of Città di Città

It is too early to try to evaluate the results and outcome of this complex process. If we want to propose the direct question of what changes we have been able to introduce through the strategic planning process, we can indicate only initial, provisional and probably fragile results. I would like to be guided in this reflection by the four tracks proposed by Albrechts. The documents and communications used to develop and present the vision were received by the actors – from the mayors to the representatives of organised interests – with great interest, both in the content and information and in the prospect of being able to offer a new orientation in a situation of rapid change.

At the same time, we have to admit that the strategy of habitability, which sought to instil a set of new ideas into governance practice was not able to change the existing paradigms of the governance culture. The media in general are not attracted by planning actions and documents. The Province as a whole has not endorsed the strategy and the President continues to be more attracted by the hard mainstream “infrastructure-and-big-projects” approach than by the soft objective of designing and implementing a multi-dimensional policy for improving habitability. This is of course linked to our capacity to construct a convincing argument, capable of persuading the current leadership (Majone, 1989), but is also due in no small part to the complex political game of symbolic politics (Edelman, 1985) in which we can play only a minor role.

So far the strategic project has been perceived as the brilliant initiative of a very active *assessore* (whose function has been re-named as “assessore for habitability and the strategic plan”), carried out with the support of the Polytechnic. I think the ability of the strategy to conquer the centre-stage has fallen below our expectations, and this is linked to the extreme complexity of the process described by Patsy Healey, particularly, in an arena which is overcrowded and extremely fragmented and where simplified conventional messages always seem to have the edge in political communication.

If we look at our capacity to initiate immediate actions – the second track – we see a story of partial successes and of encouraging hopes. As I said earlier, the competition for projects and good practices achieved a great response, opening up new opportunities for this planning process. In Lindblom’s terms, I see this as a promising way of using the “intelligence of society”; of substituting interaction for analysis; of devising a new enabling role for planning. As a consequence this approach must imply a profound change in the relationship between the public administration and the subjects which emerged in the competition. The problem we have had is that the great energy that developed as a result of the competition has been only very partially utilised. The lack of preparedness of the bureaucracy of the Province and the fear of being overwhelmed by requests for assistance and funding has prevented the Province from committing the public institution to a more open interaction. Those with political and administrative responsibility have decided to concentrate only upon the ten winners of the competition, in our view failing to understand the nature of the demand coming from the 259 proposers: above all to be recognised as discussion partners in a relevant policy process, to be supported in creating networks across different projects and practices and to be helped in creating new communication channels with the public administration.

At the same time it must be noted that many projects have been developed independently from the Provincial action and that the method of the competition of projects has seen a diffusion in the planning practices of the Province.

We cannot yet say what may come of this stream of action. We have certainly seen some good developments assisted by the Province and spontaneous organisation of networking, as well as some disillusion. Even so, I do believe that this is a very promising route for

planning in general. It is an opportunity to renew the field of participatory planning, engaging the community in a more proactive form of participation. This approach has conquered its legitimacy and in the last January the Assessore has launched a second competition of the Città di Città Project.

Other immediate actions are the six pilot projects proposed by the Province, which are being developed and where encouraging first steps are being taken in their implementation.

All this is also indirectly connected to the third track, that of stakeholder involvement. Throughout the process we have tried to establish a positive interaction with the various *assessori*, officers of different provincial sectors, representatives of interest groups, as well as other relevant actors. As stated above, some provisional results have been achieved: the cooperative effort for the preparation of the Atlas of the different sectoral policies, the collaboration in the development of the pilot projects, the partnership with the Municipality of Milan and with the Chamber of Commerce for the *Triennale* exhibition, the direct involvement of many stakeholders in the competition for projects and good practices. The problem again has been how to generate a sufficient level of commitment to produce some kind of intellectual and social capital in the process (Innes et al., 1994); capital that can allow the ideas to “travel” and to sediment into a new culture rather than being a succession of episodes, as Healey states. It is something which experts and planners can influence only to a limited extent and which depends on the general process of political communication, with a significant role for the media.

Finally we have tried to reach public opinion with information about change in the urban region, problems, opportunities and possible new perspectives. This is cited by Albrechts as a means of indirectly raising the attention of political actors for the project but also offers a way to root the ideas proposed by the strategic plan in the local community. We tried to do this mainly through the competition and through the *Triennale* event which, as stated, attracted quite a wide public considering that it was an exhibition about a planning topic. We have invested relevant resources in trying to make our messages as clear as possible. This need for communication which was able to reach the citizens of the urban region was also important for our actions because it pushed us to translate complex concepts into non-technical language, establishing a dialogue with experts in the field of communication with whom we have tried to achieve a good level of reciprocal understanding.

Looking back at this intense experience, therefore, we cannot arrive at simple conclusions. The process is ongoing; it has been experimental, full of hopes, difficulties, disillusion and enthusiasm. We are now in the middle of a new phase in which we are working upon the second competition for projects aimed at consolidating the results of the first phase, and we are bringing the *Triennale* exhibition into the territory of the Province in all the “Cities” of the City of Cities.

If we look back to this three years effort we have to underline that it has been and is a voyage of discovery in the field of uncertainties.

But the final question is: this contingent exploratory character of this experience, in the light of the literature we have been discussing, must be interpreted as a deviation from a mainstream conception of strategic planning due to the absence of a strong leadership and to the fragmentation of powers or could even be regarded as an appropriate approach

to strategic planning in situations of growing complexity and rapid change of dynamic urban regions?

We are interested in discussing what are the implications for planning if we admit that the latter could be true.

Note

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Many materials from the Strategic Project "City of Cities" are available on the website <http://www.cittadicitta.it>

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