



Urbanistica n. 130

May-August 2006

Distribution by www.planum.net

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The centrality of the periphery

Maurizio Marcelloni

Amongst the elements assumed by the new master plan for Rome, for which the counter-measures were recently adopted, we find the centrality of the periphery: an objective that is part of the challenge created by the new form of the contemporary city. The scale of Rome is truly unique: approximately 129,000 hectares. Its development provides an immediate reading of the city-archipelago, even inside its perimeter. However, we should forget, notwithstanding this physical dimension, that Rome has, in any case, now assumed an extramunicipal scale that can be read in physical continuities and relationships with many surrounding areas: the municipal archipelago is part of a metropolitan archipelago. Undoubtedly we are dealing with a process that is still in the initial stages: the limited amount of statistical data still demonstrates a contradiction between the significant demographic growth of the nearby municipalities, with respect to the constant stability of demographics in Rome and, on the contrary, a continually strong growth in the number of people working in the capital, compared to a contained level of growth in the nearby municipalities. This decentering of significant functions also affects the heart of the large city. In fact, in Rome this trend began in the periphery. As part of this new dynamic the periphery of the large city now finds itself in a position between the old compact city, which still tends to fulfil its role as the focus and definition of important images, and the surrounding municipalities that tend to acquire a new

quota of important functions and which also often possess their own important historical identities. The mayors of these areas are now beginning to perform very active roles, much like in the large city. The contemporary city, of which Rome is undoubtedly a very good expression, is demonstrating a revival of the role of nearby municipalities and the periphery. This is a general trend that is affecting all large cities. Within the city, the role of the historical periphery may assume different meanings: it may be forgotten by the economic dynamics between the centre and nearby municipalities, or it may be involved. In the first case it becomes the point of concentration of all of the factors necessary for further exclusion; in the second case, there is hope to build a vital reality within the new contemporary city. I believe that as part of this dynamic at the metropolitan scale, the decentering of administrative roles within large municipalities is ever more urgent and the single municipalities can play an equally active role. The idea proposed by the new master plan to create so-called new urban and metropolitan centralities is part of this framework. There are many reasons for this, the first and foremost being the startup of a process of building a polycentric urban structure. The idea of the new centralities stimulates polycentrism, focused on the objective that each municipality must possess its own vital centre, which must be strong and recognisable. I should mention that the subtitle of the new master plan, which disappeared in the adopted version, was *The Cities of Rome*. Traditionally, the question of the 'periphery' was dealt with through a range of policies: a collection of punctual interventions of

varying nature (the redesign of a road, the creation of a missing connection, the construction of a new public park or some other service for the elderly, etc.) whose objective was that of improving the quality of services in the area. These policies (integrated programmes, Prusst, etc.) undoubtedly represent important operations, though they are insufficient for modifying the structure of the periphery. In fact, they are actions with an exclusively local influence. The idea of the new urban and metropolitan centralities lies in the fact that these diffuse policies must be tied to strong policies concentrated on correcting the isolation of the area, inserting it within an urban, if not metropolitan system. In simple terms the question of the 'periphery' must be dealt with simultaneously from the bottom and the top, employing policies that unite the local and the global scale. The new urban centrality of the Romanina appears, amongst the many called for in the new plan, to be emblematic of these issues. The design challenge is that of giving an urban project the sense of being an intervention at an intermediate scale: not a large architectural project, but the identification of an urban sign; not a finite project, but an articulated programme for the identification of a system of spaces of relationship: the hierarchy of accessibility, the system of green spaces, the design of public spaces. In other terms we are speaking of the organisation and the quality of public space, around which and over time to construct the built portions, based on unitary criteria that are capable of guaranteeing the proposed system of public spaces, but also capable of leaving ample space for architectural design. For me the most important drawing of any urban project is that

which defines the general structure of a project and its relationships with context: this drawing is the result of a lengthy analysis of the surrounding territories, of investigations and discussions with neighbourhood committees. It determines a series of punctual interventions outside of or along the margins of the new centrality (also defined in terms of their cost), without which the new central area is inaccessible to the residents of the surrounding neighbourhoods, for whom it is to be constructed. The true danger of these large interventions is, in fact, that attention is concentrated exclusively on accessibility at the large scale and that, in the end, the new point of attraction remains just that, above all for those who come from some distance. This is the result of privileging the global to the detriment of the local, leading to an inverse process to that for which the centrality was created: the creation of a new heart of an urban area. Thus the primary objective is that of rooting the project within the territory, carefully identifying the functions to be placed, its connections with the exterior, the offering of services based on demand and the valorisation of the elements of recognition. From this point of view, the constant relationship with the X Municipality was a determining factor. Passing from a real estate type project to one that is based on the creation of points of interest for the city and the territory, where the very process of negotiation (quantity, quality, costs, etc.) is the result of public discussion. In other terms, the construction of a shared project of urban transformation, where scheduling is as important as design. An attempt to construct a process of guiding public decisions, within which the terms of exchange, and the

advantages for the city and the local population are both evident and explicit. International architecture competitions are also part of this framework: they are a piece of the puzzle, but always just one piece, and part of a much more complex operation.