Planning the historic centres in Italy: for a critical outline

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1. The Italian lesson

A recent study *Redevelopment by Tradition: Urban Renewal in World Heritage Cities* (Kupka 2012) recognises the specificity of the Italian approach to the plan for the historic city centres within the European context as a whole and, in particular, compared with the urban renewal by replacement policies largely adopted in the Netherland.

"Many Italian city centres are a unique book of history. Their successive phases of (re)development can be clearly read. Most of them offer a coherent and equilibrated townscape, without the predominance of modern replacements. Here, a slow and organic-piece by piece-development process seems to be at work. We have called this process 'Redevelopment by Tradition' – the way in which European cities have developed over centuries, before radical large scale transformations took over, mainly between 1880 and 1980. Dutch Urban Renewal leaves a more or less opposite impression: more replacement than restoration, but – on the other hand – a considerable production of social housing in the Historic City centres. Where Italian urban renewal is a gradual process with quantitatively modest 'outputs' over the last decades, in Holland the old districts have been replaced or renovated in great part towards 1995" (Kupka 2012, p. 10).

The abstract (in Italian) of this book is more explicit: it states that "the slow and organic development process" that has characterised the transformation of Italian city centres "could be a recipe for other cities with a significant artistic heritage" (Kupka 2012, p. 11).

In the Italian context, urban preservation themes find a unique 'culture medium' in terms of both theories and practical experimentation. Thus, it is somewhat surprising that, notwithstanding the presence of an incredibly vast literature on related issues, a theme that is so deeply rooted in the urban design culture and the very characteristics of the Italian landscape - i.e., the theme of historic centres and renewal policies - has been the object of so few attempts to write an exhaustive and systematic treatise, aiming for a unified account of this subject. Let us take a quick look at some of them.

In a long essay written in 1975, focusing on the discipline of restoration – or, to be precise, the "preservation of the cultural heritage" (Vassallo 1975, p. 92) – Eugenio Vassallo offered a broad exegesis of the protection of ancient city centres and an account of how it evolved through the last century. Much more recent is a book edited by Mariacristina Giambruno (2007), which nevertheless may be viewed as not dissimilar from Vassallo's essay: it is a collection of studies that – as the subtitle recites, through *Piani, strumenti e progetti per i Centri storici* ("Plans, instruments and projects for the Historic Centres") – aims to bring together the essential information towards a history of urban restoration practices in Italy.

Il recupero della città esistente ("Recovering the existing city"; Gabrielli 1993) is a subjective narration that unfolds through the collected writings produced, between 1968 and 1992, by one of the leading exponents of the National Association of Historic and Artistic Centres (Ancsa). Ancsa was established in 1961, one year after the event that may rightly be seen at its true founding moment/document - the proclamation of the Gubbio Charter, i.e., the final statement drawn up upon the conclusion of the 1961 conference on "the preservation and rehabilitation of historic city centres" - and a detailed account of the activities of the association is provided by Carolina Di Biase (Di Biase 2011) in her essay *50 anni Ancsa* ("Ancsa

50 years"). In this connection we should also mention an earlier study by Chiara Mazzoleni (1991), *Dalla salvaguardia del centro storico alla riqualificazione della città esistente. Trent'anni di dibattito dell'Ancsa* ("From the preservation of the historic centre to the rehabilitation of the existing city. Thirty years of debate at Ancsa").

The most systematic attempt to draw up a comprehensive and critical treatise on such issues from the perspective of urban planning can be found in the second part of a book by Carlo Gasparrini, *L'attualità dell'urbanistica (*"Topicality of city planning"; Gasparrini 1994), entitled *Dal recupero dei Centri Storici alla riqualificazione della città esistente* ("From the restoration of Historic Centres to the rehabilitation of the existing city"). With a special focus on the cumulative aspects of urban planning skills and the elements that may help to compose a history of urban planning and urban design techniques, let me take the liberty of adding two works of mine to this list: a book *Progetto urbanistico e città esistente* ("Urban planning and the existing city"; Bonfantini 2002) and an essay *Adeguamento e relazioni tra città vecchia e città nuova* ("Adjustments and relationships between the old city and the new one"; Bonfantini 2001).

These notes do not do away with the need for a broader and more systematic survey that might construct a 'map' of what has been written over the last few decades on urban planning applied to an existing city, much along the lines of the comprehensive bibliographical essay written 35 years ago by Cervellati and Miliari (1977).

2. A periodisation: three stages of development of the urban plan for the existing city

The post-WWII period and the 1960s in particular are identified by many authors as a turning point in the principles of urban planning for the existing city. Arturo Lanzani views that period as the time when "Historic centres were born."

"The practice of adding floors to existing structures and replacing collapsed buildings, as was typical of the immediate post-war years, having come to an end, the numerous punctual building replacements and the small-scale residential 'gutting' practices of the 1950's having spent their momentum, the disputes between the advocates of different reconstruction styles – whether in style, modern or defined according to a more interesting theory of blending into the environment and pre-existing elements – now over, the notion of 'historic centre' came to the fore. This concept delimited a portion of the city that housed an ancient building heritage (making it into a specific element in the zoning plan), providing for not so much a controlled transformability, but rather, in actual fact, for a widespread restoration and rehabilitation process geared to the preservation of the existing structures, while at the same time subjecting the more ambitious renovation projects to a more stringent control … This city zone became in actual practice the place of preservation and safekeeping for a significant document of material history and traditional city layout, and was by and large spared from the normal cycle of urban transformation" (Lanzani 2003, p. 82).

Similarly, Dennis Rodwell sees this period as a pivotal moment in the United Kingdom: "The 1960s were formative years for the future of historic cities in Britain and attempts at reconciling the emerging agenda of urban conservation with the mainstream of modern town planning" (Rodwell 2007, p. 36).

However, a valid periodisation (Pomian 1980) for the urban plan for the existing city, with a specific focus on the Italian experience, must consider an earlier stage than this, as well as a subsequent one.

In the course of an initial stage – the second half of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century – the city of the past was essentially perceived as an obstacle to modernity. The problem that city planners had to address was how to remould the forms of the city inherited from the past to conform to the workings of the modern city: how to adapt the old city to the new. The interventions envisaged – more or less incisive and more or less pervasive as the case might be – proposed an in-depth redefinition of the urban organisation (of which Haussmann's Paris may be viewed as the prototype), a restructuring of the pre-existing urban fabric to fit the newly added parts. Open space – the road network – constituted the focus of the city planning intervention, while historic built-up space was perceived as a malleable material, ready to undergo the transformations imposed by the new setup. The gamut of technical procedures developed during this period reflected a synthesis and, at times, a confrontation, or even a harsh conflict, between the contributions of engineering culture and historical-artistic culture applied to urban design.

The years that followed the second world war saw a drastic change in the thematisation of the urban plan for the pre-existing city. The city of the past – identified with the notion of 'historic centre' – was now viewed as a legacy to be preserved: a 'unitary monument' to be retained in its integrity. Thus the urban planner's task became that of protecting the historic city structures from the aggression of the modern city. Accordingly, the urban plan for the historic centre tends to turn into a special plan for a special object: an 'island' subject to *ad hoc* technical-design guidelines that set apart the historic downtown from the rest of the urban fabric, exempting it from the dynamics and the rules that preside over the transformation of the latter. Built-up space is no longer perceived as something that can be freely manipulated and, to some extent, sacrificed, it is deemed worthy of preservation ('resilient') in that it is the keeper of values that hinge on its entirety, its integrity. At the centre of the plan for the historic centre are built-up space and the preservation of its differential qualities, its qualitative factors. The technical procedures that come to be defined according to this new approach give rise to a minute set of rules encompassing three levels: detailed control over all uses, to ensure they are all appropriate and compatible; careful scrutiny of the nature and intensity of the interventions on individual building artefacts as a function of the relative preservation/upgrade/transformation requirements; specific rules on the physical outputs of the interventions designed to ensure compliance with the qualitative attributes of which the historic downtown is deemed to be a repository.

As for this last aspect – the technical handling of quality factors – the rules for the control of the physical outputs of the interventions tend to work along two different lines. One design modality – based on a *typological approach* – typically concerns itself with *individual buildings*: in other words, it is felt that architectural and historical values reside in the characteristics of the individual buildings making up the historic centre and that the urban fabric is formed, through a mere assembly process, by the coming together of (typologically defined) building 'pieces'. According to this approach, the characteristics to be taken into account to govern the interventions should be selected on the basis of typological criteria, and it all

boils down to geometric-distributive-structural rules deduced from the classification of the individual building units.

Another modality for the technical management of quality factors is based on an approach which may be rated as a *relational approach*: design guidelines are expressed in terms of *complex aggregates* and *individual constituent materials*. In this case, it is believed that quality lies on the one hand in key spatial syntax factors (i.e., in characteristic arrangement provisions that configure qualifying urban sequences, groups of buildings and portions of the urban fabric giving rise to recognisable units), and, on the other hand, in the individual materials and elements making up the material/formal vocabulary of the historic downtown (a lexicon comprised of specific types of roofs, windows, doors, plaster coatings, etc.).

A third and new stage got underway in the early 1980s, when the urban plan for the historic city lost its *insular* nature to *cut across* the urban agglomeration as a whole and become one of the modes and instruments for an overall restructuring plan encompassing the entire city and its surrounding territory. In the next two paragraphs (§§ 3-4), we shall discuss at greater length the characteristics of the first two stages briefly described above, and in the seven paragraphs after that (§§ 5-11) we shall take a closer look at some salient aspects of the third stage, regarding the modalities and the purpose of the plan for the historic centre and the historic city in the contemporary city.

3. Reforming the old city

In the period that went from the unification of the country through WWII, in Italy, the urban plan was primarily focused on conceptions and instruments aiming to reconcile the historic parts of a city with the newly added outer districts and to adapt the ancient urban fabrics to the necessities of 'contemporary life'. The interventions on existing buildings and materials (throughout the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century) were largely characterised by recomposition procedures that, with a variable degree of intensity on a case-by-case basis, restructured the urban layout, by 'sacrificing', that is to say, by demolishing and, possibly, reconstructing, more or less sizeable sections of the historic built-up space.

At the turn of the 19th century, the rectification, alignment and gutting techniques of the initial period, which applied to the city the tenets of a basically engineering-oriented culture, began to be flanked, and contaminated, by techniques arising from the historic-artistic culture that came forcefully to the fore as city planning gradually came to be acknowledged as a discipline in its own right (Ernesti 1988, 1991; Zucconi 1989). The notion that the historic city was a heritage to be preserved translated, first of all, into the concept of monument and the technique of isolation as the procedure to be used to underscore the value thereof. The aim to preserve and enhance the value of elements of architectural significance found expression through interventions whereby minor constructions were removed from all around the monument, thereby creating a 'free' perimeter around elements that were perceived as nodes in the spatial organisation of the city and/or as landmarks in the new urban landscape. At the beginning of the 20th century, a gradual realisation that historic sites should be prized not only because of their artistic significance but also on account of their documentary value prompted a new outlook that was critical of demolition and isolation practices and spoke out against the "increasingly widespread prejudice whereby the artistic and historic

heritage of our country may be deemed to reside in its principal monuments and most salient artworks" (Beltrami 1892 cited in Vassallo 1975, p. 11). From this cultural background emerged a new technique, that of urban 'pruning' or 'thinning out' (Giovannoni 1913, 1995), which, through punctual interventions, minimised the scale of the demolition processes applied to the existing built-up space, and countered the notion of preservation reserved for a few monumental landmarks works with a notion of historic assets encompassing entire city quarters, 'environments' to be retained as a whole. From this fundamental acquisition took its cue the debate that got underway after the second world war (Piccinato 1944), when an understanding of the historic centre as a 'unitary monument' to be preserved in its entirety prevailed: "It is anti-cultural, anti-historical – absurd – to isolate a monument from its environment, that is to say, the pre-existing city: tearing down minor building structure compromises the nature of major architectural works … Proceeding by parts in our time is no longer possible, as it ends up by destroying what we want to retain … It is therefore not admissible to refute the concept of the pre-existing city – at this point, a historic centre to all intents and purposes – as the one and only monument to be preserved" (Cervellati, Miliari 1977, p. 16).

4. Preserving the historic centre

As the attribution of artistic and documentary value was gradually extended to an ever greater range of constitutive elements of the 'inherited' city – from a few emerging and isolated monuments to the urban 'environments' of which they are a part, or the homogeneous areas containing a disseminated array of 'minor' building structures, up to entire urban quarters of ancient origin –, in other words, as the demand for protection and preservation became stronger and more and more widespread, the urban plan for the historic parts of the city took on the technical form of 'making safe': saving the historic heritage from destruction as well as from the 'current' city, its workings, its practices.

Along these lines, in the urban plan, the historic centre has profited for a long time from a separate technical-design statute, marked by characters of alterity and, in many respects, foreignness, to the remaining, vital part of the urban body, devoted to modernity. For a long time, the historic centre has been separated from the rest of the urban fabric both by a temporal threshold – the pre-modern city – and a physical limit – typically, the walled in city –, its role that of an area earmarked for restoration works, museums, and sometimes, the mis-en-scène of the identity of local communities. A secured, shielded space.

Thus, the preservation of the historic centre tended to assume the character of an 'insular' plan, regulated by minute, meticulous procedures designed to ensure that the specific features of a historic area would not be obliterated. It should be noted that, notwithstanding the aforesaid limits, this approach was a valuable attempt to provide a well-defined answer to the demands alluded to by such vague terms as 'identity' and 'urban quality', an attempt to move beyond the generic, indistinct and unutterable nature of such concepts and to test out instead relevant technical criteria by transposing them into concrete regulatory mechanisms. The technical procedures conceived for the protection of the historic centre were essentially designed to identify the recursive and characterising aspects of the urban fabric – believed to be structural elements thereof as well as decisive quality principles in it spatial organisation – and to boost the role of cohesive factors – combination and composition rules governing the mutual interactions of the different urban

materials, according to relationships regarded as qualifying elements in a settlement context.

5. Revamping the existing city

More recent urban plans have challenged the schematic notion of the historic centre as a uniform, indivisible block. Instead of an absolute value attributed *a priori*, historical significance becomes an instrument through which value is assigned, a discriminant used to recognise those portions of the urban territory that possess specific connotative features, with a view to promoting an active improvement in the contemporary organisation of the urban fabric. To speak about historical significance therefore becomes a way to refer synthetically to a system of familiar and shared values, to underscore the presence of – and to propose for consideration – unique quality factors which the plan must interpret and translate into technically manageable forms.

Since, within this new framework, the attribution of value cannot prescind from the attribution of roles, in contemporary city planning, the plan for the historic city is characterised by its inclusiveness: no longer confined within the perimeter of the historic centre, it affects all parts of the existing city, irrespective of their more or less distant origin in time, and its regulatory elements are flanked by recomposition provisions. The historic city, serving as a 'selector' of settlement values, derives its meaning from within the restructuring project defined in the urban plan and becomes an essential component thereof in the overall organisation proposal. In lieu of a space taken away from the city and a self-referential place, the historic city becomes a part among parts, but one that is specifically connoted and whose peculiarities suggest a valuable potential and a role in a close and organic relationship with the other parts.

6. Historic centres as infrastructures for the present-day urban setting

To conceive the historic centre as an 'urbanity infrastructure' means to underscore its character as an endowment for the contemporary city: a potential that may, or may not, find expression in helping to bring about habitability conditions in present-day urban areas. Not a space taken away from the contemporary city, then, as in a certain historic centre planning tradition, but rather a space that is embedded in it, with a role to play in its overall organisation. Talking about a "contemporary historic city" – according to the title of a recent book (Evangelisti, Orlandi, Piccinini 2008) that provides "an overview of ideas and plans for the contemporary historic city," starting from the case of Bologna – is a false oxymoron in that there is no contradiction here but rather an invitation to reflect on the present-day forms and roles of the parts that are termed 'historic' in the contemporary city.

Albeit affected by land use changes which may be significant and sometimes will even bring about drastic changes in its characters, the historic centre constitutes a 'townscape' that is resilient in its configuration, and is non replicable. The irreproducibility of urban areas of this type, which cannot be created *ex novo* in the construction dynamics of physical space, makes them special, and different from any other product of contemporary urban space, any other *urbanscapes*, such as, for instance, 'superplaces' and 'citadels' (Agnoletto, Delpiano, Guerzoni 2007), residential and production 'colonies', 'clusters' of diffused settlements (Merlini

2009; Munarin, Tosi 2001), or 'planned districts' (Laboratorio Città Pubblica 2009)[3]. And the same applies to their performance qualities, which are unique and cannot be emulated by other parts of the city.

"Theoretical and technical acquisitions have suggested the wisdom of viewing [the historic centre and] the historic city as a whole as part of an overall process of requalification of the contemporary territory, capturing incipient and promising dynamics that seem able to give new vitality and new roles to its different parts. Thanks to its diversified morphotypological components, in fact, the historic city constitutes a resource, both to counter the homogenisation of urban space and to catch a multiplicity of requirements and lifestyles" (Gabellini 2010, p. 32).

The challenge to be met by city planning therefore lies in being able to recognise and activate the versatile performance potential of the historic centre and the historic city of which the centre is part – and, in particular, the uncommon capacity of the historic centre to serve as an urban 'framework' and a high-intensity relationality place (Bonfantini, Di Giovanni 2011)[4] – to serve as an urbanity factor for the contemporary city, where by 'urbanity' it is meant an urban condition that is positive, rich, fulfilling and full of meaning – a good criterion to recognise the successful, qualifying, vital parts of a settlement.

7. The historic centre today

To talk about historic centres, especially where Italian historic centres are concerned, means to consider parts that, true enough, are not reproducible, but at the same time are a typical presence in the settlement palimpsests: of the over 8,000 Italian cities, 90% of which have fewer than 15,000 inhabitants (Ricci 2007, p. 7), just about all, big and small, have a least one historic centre. Quoting as his source the *Atlante dei centri storici d'Italia* produced by the Central Cataloguing and Documentation Institute of the Ministry of Cultural Assets and Activities, Simone Ombuen informs us that Italy's ancient centres number 22 thousand (Ombuen 2000, p. 193). In short, historic centres constitute a distinctive trait of the Italian city landscape. But what is a historic centre? Vivid and easily grasped is the intuitive meaning of this term, which, however, becomes evasive and cannot be explained as easily and in an equally persuasive manner if we take a closer look and attempt a more rigorous analytical formulation. A few passages from recent publications may help us collect useful elements towards a definition.

According to Longo and Graziano (2009, p. 45) "By historic centre it is meant … that portion of the urban fabric that dates back to the pre-industrial period, before the advent of mechanized traffic … One might say with G.C. Argan (1990) that the historic centre coincides *tout court* with the pre-industrial city … but to this day there is no clear-cut definition."

In Mioni and Pedrazzini (2005, p. 23): "it was deemed appropriate to classify as 'historic centres' … those settlement areas that common sense … almost instinctively recognises as 'ancient' or in any event 'old' portions of present-day

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[3] For these terms that attempt to define recurrent settling patterns in present-day urban areas, the reader is referred to Gabellini (2010, pp. 31-38), Di Giovanni (2010, pp. 49-68), Bonfantini, Di Giovanni (2011, pp. 64-65).

[4] Historic city cores are realms where the space for life in public generally displays an extraordinary extension, complexity and continuity, variety and consistency. In some cases, historic centres continue to be 'the' space for life in public in the contemporary city" (Di Giovanni 2010, p. 53).

built-up space … such areas are still identified (not only by the people who live and work there) as places that differ visually and perceptively from the rest of the settlement (of which, oftentimes, albeit not always, they remain the primary fulcrum), which are attributed special emblematic significance … Even people from other places and other countries … are able to distinguish where such non-modern environments start and end … since we are dealing with an urban phenomenology which is evident by itself and immediately apparent to everyone. In this sense, we might say that in many instances historic centres are veritable 'states of mind'".

According to Gabellini (2010, p. 31): "From above, from a medium distance (of between ca 3,000 and 6,000 m), it is possible to distinguish in the European palimpsest … a few settlements that might be termed 'morphologically defined', being compositions of urban materials that give origin to forms which may be told apart from one another … [Among such settlements] historic centres constitute the distinctive trait of the European landscape, and the Italian landscape in particular."

According to the first definition, a historic centre is a historically determined portion of a city: the pre-industrial city. In this case, the identification must be entrusted to a temporal threshold, that is to say, an external chronological criterion. The second definition, instead, relies on perception and phenomenic experience, and the attribution of symbolic meaning and significance which these urban areas are subjected to on the part of those – whether inhabitants, workers, visitors – who experience them. The elements of a subjective but widely generalised and shared perception, and a common collective imaginary make it possible to grasp what is meant by historic centre, which, like the districts described by Lynch, is a distinctly recognisable part for people inside it, moving within it, or passing through[5].

In the third case, an intermediate look at the territory – from a point of view which is neither too close to its simple constituent elements, nor too far from them in an exceedingly compacted vision of the urban materials – makes it possible to discern, within the composition of the contemporary city, the configuration of several settlement formations, including the historic centres, which may be clearly distinguished from one another. In other words, notwithstanding their diversity, historic centres display unmistakable patterns, revealing vivid, characteristic shapes: speaking of 'urban concretions' could be a way to underscore their traits of strong spatial cohesion (between built-up and open spaces[6]), integration, mutual harmony, and that peculiar, organic 'regular irregularity' that sets them apart and makes them morphologically recognisable.

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[5] "Districts are the medium-to-large sections of the city, conceived of as having two-dimensional extent, which the observer mentally enters 'inside of', and which are recognizable as having some common, indentifying character. Always identifiable from the inside, they are also used for exterior reference if visible from the outside" (Lynch 1960, p. 47).

[6] Hence, the distinctive trait of public space in historic centres lies in its 'interiorness' – its being a concave space (Consonni 1989).
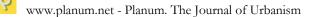
8. Historic centre and historic city

A historic city is not the same as a historic centre: it is a broader concept. We could say that the historic city is the totality of the historic parts of a settlement, one of such parts being the historic centre.

In recent urban plans, the transition from the notion of *historic centre* to that of *historic city* has reflected a deliberate effort to innovate the design approach to the 'inherited' city. This signified a departure from the customary focus of the urban plans for existing settlements – i.e., something largely predetermined, circumscribed, 'insular' (the historic centre) – in favour of something more open-ended and admitting no clear-cut definition (the historic city). Indeed, the new approach made it possible to wipe out and overcome the univocal attention to a specific and clearly delimited area, to encompass a more complex set of elements seen against a network of urban relationships that cannot be confined: "Going from the *historic centre* to the *historic city* … amounted to overcoming a defensive, sclerotised concept and developing a greater, dutiful, attention to the evolutive potential of a qualitative heritage that only now was grasped and addressed in its systemic essence, to be recognised through its pervasiveness in the territory, but also to be identified selectively as a function of its discontinuities and its integration potential" (Manieri Elia 2001, p. 114).

Which city parts should be rated as 'historic' is a problem: it is not a hard fact, it must rely on interpretation.

In recent years, in many planning experiences, we have witnessed a progressive "expansion of the concept of the historicity of settlements" (Storchi 1999, p. 14), whereby the attention devoted to the physical traits deemed to be characterising, qualifying aspects and bearers of values, typically reserved for historic centres and their preservations, was extended to ever larger portions of the city. For example, in the urban plan for Naples "it was decided to include 19th and 20th century urban fabric in the new perimetration of historic settlements" (Comune di Napoli 1995, p. 132). In the general land use plan for Ivrea, the historic city is comprised of an *ancient* historic city and a *modern* historic city, and the latter includes the parts built due to the effect of the Olivetti experience (Galuzzi 2005): in actual fact, such parts, albeit constructed more recently, constitute the special, unique features that characterise the historic city of Ivrea. However, the recognition of the scope of the historic city cannot be equated with a widening of cartographic boundaries based on the extension of a temporal threshold. In the plan for the city of Rome, the well-argued "necessary transition – within the descriptions and predictions of the Plan – from a concept of historic centre to a broader notion of Historic City" does not amount to a "mere exercise of pushing forward the date by which historic values are to be identified, a pure and simple widening of a perimeter. This acknowledgment of the Historic City calls for an interpretative process, the ability to spot portions of the city distributed within the territory traditionally viewed as 'peripheral' and to select, even within recent urbanisation processes, individual urban sites and materials that express historical values and therefore require a different consideration, mostly geared towards restoration" (Gasparrini 2002, p. 66)[7].

In Rome, the identification of the 'materials' of the historic city hinges on the drafting of a Quality Charter: a detailed document which serves as a minute

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[7] "From the Historic Centre to the Historic City" is the meaningful title of one of the plates of the Rome Land Use Plan, see Gasparrini (2001), Manieri Elia (2001).

cadastre "of those elements that may bestow quality onto the urban context they are part of" (Rossi 2008, p. 56). In drawing up the Quality Charter, with special reference to the investigation into the contemporary city, Piero Ostilio Rossi underscores that "at the base … [there is] a delicate methodological issue regarding the need to replace the traditional analysis and selection criteria based on the *date of construction* to new ones based on *value judgments*" (Rossi 2008, p. 58).

In lieu of an abstractly defined absolute concept, 'historicity' thus becomes a relative and critical concept, an interpretative instrument that may be used to attribute value regardless of purely chronological criteria: "Historicity is construed as a recognised value, as opposed to the outcome of a periodisation established *a priori*" (Gabellini 2008, p. 94). It is about the recognition of pre-existing parts of the urban territory that are believed to possess specific *differential* qualities, which the urban plan must retain and effectively bolster. 'Historic' is an attribute that serves as an indicator and a 'selector' of qualities that deserve to be preserved, whether rooted in a distant or a recent past. It is a choice and a process of selection for the elements to be dealt with by means of planning criteria of *permanence* and *persistence*, as opposed to transformation, a selection that is conducted within the body of the existing city and that invites inquiries about the role that the historic city may play within the process of reorganisation of the contemporary city. It is a non neutral operation, whose constructive dimension is aptly summarised in the words of Kevin Lynch: "To preserve effectively, we must know for what the past is being retained and for whom. The management of change and the active use of remains for present and future purpose are preferable to an inflexible reverence for a sacrosanct past. The past must be chosen and changed, made in the present. Choosing a past helps us to construct a future" (Lynch 1972).

9. Dimensions of the plan for the historic city

The new plan for Bologna may be used as a testing ground, where different dimensions of the plan for the historic city – molecular, by parts, structural – are exemplified and find expression.

Molecular is the image of the historic city as can be seen in a table of the Urban Building Regulations (Rue) entitled "Discipline of urban materials and classification of the territory"[8].

It is the image produced by individual buildings of historical-architectural and documental interest (denoted with red and pink, respectively, and conventionally identified with the buildings already existing in 1949), which are flanked by more recent buildings of historical-architectural and documental interest (denoted with

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[8] This and the other plates mentioned below may be seen in the official website of the City of Bologna (www.comune.bologna.it/urbanistica-lavori), in the section on the new urban planning instruments adopted by the city. They can also be consulted in the pages (and the annexed DVD) of a book entitled *Bologna. Leggere il nuovo piano urbanistico* (Comune di Bologna 2009): in particular, pp. 88-89 show a significant detail of the plate illustrating the "Discipline of urban materials and classification of the territory" which is part of the Urban Building Regulations; p. 50 shows a plate on the "Classification of the territory" from the Municipal Structural Plan; on p. 68 we find a plate from the Urban Building Regulations: "The historic city. Domains and materials"; the "Images of the restructuring process", from the Municipal Structural Plan, concerning the City of the Railway and the Cities of Via Emilia on the Ponente and Levante sides are published on pp. 21, 30, 32.

violet and lilac, erected at a later stage and identified on the basis of the attention and critical recognition attributed to them in the specialist literature). If to the index map of the 83 1:2000 scale sheets making up the plate we apply a 'transept' so as to select a strip that cuts across the city in the north-south direction, for instance, passing through the historic centre, the overall effect that we get from reading the cartographic pieces of this cross-section in a quick succession is the image of a 'nebula' composed of the buildings highlighted in colour, whose changing density can be readily appreciated: a rarefied presence in the outermost sheets makes room for thick clusters in the proximity of the centre, which are eventually replaced by a colour saturated image in the "Core of ancient formation". To these 'molecules' identifying the individual elements making up the historic palimpsest, the urban plan associates the rules for governing the permanence and persistence profiles specified for such elements.

Areal, *by recognizable parts* is the criterion underlying the image that appears in the "Classification of the territory" plate of the Municipal Structural Plan (Psc) or the plate from the Urban Building Regulations, "The historic city. Domains and materials." Here the historic city is identified and described as the combination of sixteen "historic domains" making up the "totality of the urban fabrics of ancient origin, which have retained the recognisability of the settlement structures and the stratification of their formation processes, both in the road network and in non-built-up spaces, in the building heritage and in other artefacts. In relation to the settlement principles typical of the different historic urban fabrics, the Psc identifies and perimeters the following domains: ancient formation core domain; domains of the garden district; compact fabric domains; specialised historic domains" (Psc, Regulatory framework, art. 27). This is a peculiar sort of zoning, in which the domain referred to as "ancient formation core" constitutes a rounded-down approximation of what has been traditionally regarded as the historic centre of Bologna (the portion of the inner city delimited by beltways). A reading of the historic city by recognizable parts lays the foundation for a diversified management in the plan, since this subdivision suggests "pasts, and especially, presents and futures which cannot be homogenised, and require ad hoc plans" (Gabellini 2008, p. 95), according to specific regulatory profiles, laid out specifically for each domain.

Lastly, *structural* is the image of the historic city obtained by combining the territorial configurations that reveal the recomposition proposal put forward by the Structural Plan, its *vision*, its overall organisation project.

More specifically, it is from the combination of the "images of the restructuring process" relating to the Cities of Via Emilia (Ponente and Levante sides) and the City of the Railway that we may gather the sense and the role of the historic city in a prospect of renovated urban configuration. A historic city that we are advised to read, on the one hand, in terms of its reorganisation around a 'hinge factor' consisting of the new train station, within the framework of an overall redefinition of the system of urban centralities, and, on the other hand, in terms of the 'matrix' road infrastructure designed to link together and reorganise the entire territorial settlement (that is to say, not through the enucleation and isolation of the historic centre): "The identification of the two Cities of Via Emilia (Ponente and Levante sides) [shifts] the attention to the urban and potentially metropolitan dimension of a historic city centred on the matrix road of the Po valley settlement, to stress the notion that its rehabilitation affects a broader territory which includes it and transcends it. This structural reconnection with the rest of the territory is the

fundamental precondition of meaningfulness, vitality, future, knowing from past experience that isolation is the prelude to extreme, equally detrimental processes: ghettoisation, disuse, specialisation, gentrification" (Gabellini 2008, p. 95).

Thus, *by elements, by parts, by images* are three different approaches that animate the plan and give rise to a plural and complex view of the historic city *embedded in* and *cutting across* the contemporary city. *By elements and by parts* is the approach whereby urban design rules are defined for the different components. *By images* is the approach that reveals the structure in relation to the role played by the historic city in the recomposition project. Precisely in connection with this last aspect, with reference to the historic centre of Naples, Gasparrini and Russo (2010, p. 87) point out that a plan "should conceive a number of great, unifying themes, a number of 'narrative paths' for the city, which might serve as a unifying term of reference for the fragments from the viewpoint of the goals envisaged … overarching guidelines that might dimension and motivate the choices to be made in each fragment."

In other words, to speak of a historic city means to interpret and propose a geography for it, spelling out the system of settlement values identified in the different spatial contexts in which the historic city is organised, and setting out appropriate rules to promote such values (in the modulation of permanence and persistence profiles), while, at the same time, it also means, first and foremost, to define clearly the role that the different components of the historic city (and the measures adopted in this connection) may play within the overall reorganisation proposal, thereby making a decisive contribution to the restructuring plan for the city.

It is the same degree of complexity of the historic city as is found in the Plan for Rome, where we have a similar organisation according to three criteria – by constitutive elements, by parts, by images – with reference to the Quality Charter, the Fabrics of the Historic City and Strategic Planning Domains (five complex spatial domains organised around a set of recognised structuring elements, towards a rediscovery of the "great traces of urban morphology," as a fundamental framework for the organisation of the settlement: the Tiber, the Forum and Ancient Via Appia Archaeological Park, the Walls, the Flaminio-Forum-Eur North-South Corridor, the Railway Belt). In the new city plan, in fact, history "assumes three different levels of presence … Besides the *historic city*, conceived as one of the cities in which the plan governs the ordinary transformations, and the *Quality Charter*, which defines the modalities for the utilisation of the assets in the urban transformation processes as a function of the different fabrics they are part of, history takes on a specific structural dimension through the *strategic planning domains*. These are not hierarchical levels, rather, they are three different ways of interpreting and proposing the impact of history, so that history might exercise, in the various contexts where it applies, its propositive and forming action on the design of the contemporary city" (Marcelloni 2003, pp. 129-130).

10. From a plan setting out rules to a programme of actions

The traditional approach to the planning of historic city centres, essentially shaped around planning regulations, has been met with general dissatisfaction. For example, a recent strategic plan for the historic centre of Faenza, in promoting a "strategic plan as an alternative to traditional planning," advocates forcefully the need for a new approach: "For 30 years, and even now, virtually all plans for the historic centre adopt this method, which is easy to apply since it is based on reconnaissance: for each building there is an intervention category defining its

possible transformations; the City decides, and private operators, if and when the time comes for their intervention, will have to conform to the established category … A method that … now clearly reveals all its inadequacy, on account of the static nature of its vision of the historic centres. In a large majority of city plans, historic centres are classified (as opposed to planned for) in this manner … it is necessary to choose new working methods that will do away with the reconnaissance and regulation based approach and will focus instead on strategic and design oriented plans" (Nonni, Darchini 2008, p. 13). In the specific case of Faenza, this change in perspective has resulted in: a more explicit definition of the goals that should be pursued by a "public plan" which must be able to "speak, steer and promote, as opposed to merely recording facts" (Nonni 2007, p. 52), the identification of the themes and the formulation of the plans and strategies to be coordinated and steered towards the attainment of the desired results.

More in general, the aspects of the traditional planning tools that have come under the most severe criticism are their weak operativeness and lack of integration, i.e., a 'passive' regime of urban planning tools which are unable to trigger an actual transformation (mere 'wait and see' type regulations) and an exceedingly narrow focus, whereby the only aspect considered is the physical dimension, and solely in terms of buildings and structures. The range of problems to be addressed in the historic centres – typically, among others, the issues associated with the polarisation and radicalisation of inertia-driven processes encompassing physical, social and economic dimensions: depopulation, exodus of inhabitants and businesses, disuse of and deterioration of facilities, marginalisation (through concentration of elderly, poor and/or immigrant population groups), combined with gentrification and expulsion of weak people, and replacement, specialisation and functional (tertiary and commercial) homogenisation – requires the use of a different and broader range of instruments.

In this connection, the "Urban" Community Programme, "probably the most *advanced* among the complex programmes implemented in Italy to date" (Palermo 2002, p. 9), has been a structured innovation experiment (Ombuen 2000, Campagna 2001, Palermo *et al.* 2002). And it has also been the most significant instance of resurfacing of the question of historic centres, after a prolonged period during which these elements seemed to have vanished from the town planning agenda (as late as 2007, "What ever happened to historic centres?" was the title of a series of articles that appeared on issue 212 of *Urbanistica informazioni*). Focusing on "districts in crisis" as the target of its action, in Italy the first generation of the programme (Urban I) was characterised by the attention paid to historic centres: the object of intervention in as many as ten (Bari, Catania, Catanzaro, Cosenza, Lecce, Naples, Palermo, Salerno, Siracusa, Trieste) of the sixteen contexts considered was the historic centre and/or portions thereof. By integrating physical, social and economic measures affecting the target contexts, these complex programmes revealed their innovative character precisely on account of "their capacity to activate human energies and financial resources, alongside original physical transformation methods and techniques, in contrast with the interventions implemented during the previous century, whose innovative content relied on (and sometimes solely on) the latter aspect." (Gabellini 2008, p. 96).

Indubitably, in Italy, the most emblematic recent historic centre regeneration experience conducted according to a 'strategic ' and 'integrated' perspective was that of Genoa. The so-called *Piano della Città di Genova* ("Plan for the City of Genoa") was presented as "a strategic plan of an operational nature" (Gabrielli,

Bobbio 2005) combining both urban design and economic-social contents. A focus on action and feasibility is the essential feature that was underscored: "a … definitely not very sophisticated … instrument which, however, is operational and is summarised in about one hundred data sheets," spelling out the goals of the interventions, the relative resources and the origins thereof, the implementation times, and the players involved (Gabrielli 2005, p. 56). The programme for the historic centre set out within the framework of the plan for the city, where it constitutes its explicit core, has been collected in a specific document, referred to as the "Operational Plan for the Historic Centre" (Comune di Genova 2001).

The action for the historic centre was characterised by the capacity to coordinate different funding channels, especially those relating to the 'major events' (1992 Columbian celebrations, 2001 G8 summit, Genoa capital of European culture 2004) and a considerable number of effectively coordinated 'complex programmes' through an approach encouraging public participation in the regeneration process which was able to effect a widespread involvement of private initiative. Following "the lesson of Barcelona" (Gabrielli 2006), the action on public space (road paving, utility and lighting installations, enhancement of the urban landscape through the restoration of building facades, car-free zones), together with the recapture of the seafront by the historic centre through the restoration of the ancient harbour, also had indirect effects on the recovery and diffused micro-transformations of the building heritage. From the standpoint of practices, the dynamics that attracted new inhabitants and new inflows of city users to the historic centres (students, tourists, evening leisure time users…) played a key role: the historic centre became an attractive place to live and work in, as well as a favourite destination for leisure time pursuits and *loisir*. More in general, what is observed in the case of Genoa is a promotion and management capacity supplemented by a diversified plurality of actions whose results are not merely cumulative, but have synergetic and multiplier effects (Gabrielli 2010).

The regeneration of the historic centre of Genoa is reflected in a parallel increase in property values: while this may be viewed as a positive factor and a success indicator for the urban policies adopted, on the other hand, it outlines the boundaries of a gentrification phenomenon, which, albeit non homogeneous, will inevitably usher in new problems (social polarisation, conflicts between provisional population groups and resident 'gentrifiers' regarding the utilisation of the historic centre, in terms of time and space)[9].

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[9] "In Genoa the historic centre was the area were property values were lowest. Nowadays, property values have greatly increased, giving rise to a social problem, even though they may be viewed as an indicator of the success of the operational plan. This is an issue that deserves to be examined more closely in relation to the concept of integration, in that, among public investment policies, the role of the intervention on the housing units takes on crucial importance, in view of the need to reserve sufficient resources for social housing. In the case of Genoa the number of housing units recovered through public intervention totalled ca 300, and that was it. Obviously, it was not enough" (Gabrielli 2010, pp. 67-68). On the process of regeneration of the historic centre of Genoa and its effects, see Gastaldi (2009). Paola Briata views as "planned" the gentrification processes that took place in Genoa, "where public intervention on the historic centre through the urban regeneration policies activated during the last fifteen years clearly played a driving role" (Briata 2010, p. 327). On the gentrification phenomena taking place in the historic centre of Genoa and the encounter/clash of different population groups in the city, see also Longoni, de Benedittis (2005).

11. The current significance of the historic centre

After this analysis of traditional and current approaches to the plan for historic centres, let us now summarize the salient aspects that appear relevant to an up-to-date discussion of the issue.

A first focus of discussion may consist of assessing the current significance of the historic centre from the standpoint of its performance results: in the palimpsest of the new urban formations of the contemporary city, the historic centre is an opportunity for the formulation of a recomposition project, in view of the great ductility and the rare relational qualities that characterise it. This is a space that continues to play a potentially strategic role in the structuring of the system of urban centralities (Morandi 2004; Storchi, Armanni 2010) and the organisation of high-density urbanity areas.

Thus, in view of the performance profile expressed, the historic centre deserves to be considered (and this is a second focus) in terms of its specific characters as a morphologically identifiable complex material, typically the object of value and identity projections, which make it into an urban part that is symbolically relevant for the inhabitants.

If in the past the recognisability and individuality of the historic centre (the historic centre as a 'unitary monument') have marked its alterity within an 'insular' urban plan – a plan, that is to say, which ascribed a special, independent status to this portion of the city 'taken away' from the contemporary city – nowadays the historic centre has become a component of a more complex formation which cuts across the entire urban fabric that has emerged in the recent debate with the name of 'historic city'. The historic city (third focus) is a city planning construct designed to select from among the materials of the existing city those that lend themselves – on account of the value attributed to them and the identification of their differential qualities – to be interpreted according to profiles of permanence and persistence.

Thus, the historic city has become a theme/system in the urban restructuring plan that (fourth focus) is typically expressed according to three different working modalities: directing the attention to the individual constitutive materials; recognising different urban parts according to the different and specific composition modalities of such materials; producing images of the plan that are able to suggest the role played by the different components of the historic city within the framework of the overall organisation project, according to significant relationships.

At the heart of the historic city, we have that which today (fifth focus) represents for the historic centre a complex set of integrated urban policies, a set of policies which is not confined to the urban plan or its more traditional regulatory aspects (building intervention categories), but rather lies at the intersection of a plurality of actions and instruments of different sorts (general, sector-specific, ordinary, special), according to an original 'mix' to be defined as a function of the opportunities afforded by and the specific features of each context, which may affect not just the spatial characters (built-up space and even more importantly open space), the operating modes and the performance profiles (for example, in terms of time schedules; Mareggi 2011), but also the living practices of the different population groups, in the composition of their possible "coexistence" modalities (Bonfantini 2008).

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