

An ‘equipped axis’ of the 1965 Master Plan of Rome: an excellent case study for an appropriated critical theory of Planning.

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The Bruno Zevi Foundation wanted to include in the recalling of the town planning story of the ‘equipped axis’¹ (designed at the epoch of the elaboration of the 1965 Master Plan (MP) of Rome), an evaluation on my behalf on planning method of a general character. I do this very willingly, because I have always considered the story of the equipped axis an excellent case study useful for the discussion and the deepening of an appropriate planning theory (besides, very often used by me as such, in many exemplifying and didactic occasions).

In fact I have always considered the equipped axis;

- a) from one side, one of the few examples of the planning strategy present in the traditional elaboration of the MP in this country;
- b) in the same time, a clamorous example of how bad planning and designing can kill its best creations.

I will try to illustrate this conviction in the briefest way possible (given the scarce, space allowed) which will also be necessarily schematic.

1.Strategic contents of the equipped axis

The equipped axis has been a response – among many other possible responses, but considered the most suitable – to a unique basic problem, and in the same time a goal, always perceived from the Roman urban planning: i.e. *to create an external and alternative centrality to the historical centre.*

¹ In Italian jargon, ‘asse attrezzato’ has been defined as a linear development along a transport route, including a mix of businesses, shops, recreational and cultural facilities. In our case we make reference to the design of an equipped axis that includes the MP of Rome of 1965 with the purpose to displace a consistent amount of activities and settlements outside the Rome historical centre.

Given the historical, and I would say, organic and very peculiar characteristic of the city, the problem of Rome² has always been that of an alternative centrality, only if people did not agree to clearing its archaeological, historical and monumental heritage (like other European capitals had done in epochs of less respect for historical value). The Master Plans (MP)– that succeeded since 1870 until at present- had ignored this problem, even if for some time they had managed with a modest demography and availability of means in the respective epochs (the Quirinale/Porta Pia axis of the first MP, with all its ministerial settling as monuments, has been – for instance – a strategic response to this problem).

The 1965 equipped axis has been considered with great farsightedness (since 1929),an antithesis to the choices that are not very strategic of the fascist town planning (exception made for a generic objective of the “conquest of the sea”); which was founded on a rather scattered monumentality, and which achieved its best expression with the fascist MP of 1932 (in fact the EUR was not born as a town planning response, but as a ‘monumental’ response for the 42 Exhibition, even if later it has constituted a town planning fact of great importance and meaning for the future growth of the city).

In sum, the equipped axis has constituted the most important and authentic strategic content of the 1965 MP. To it they should be conformed all other performances and aims of the MP. With the equipped axis the MP wanted to create contemporarily an organic diversion of the most important traffic flows and in the same time a new alternative hub for public and private business/management life. Thus its basic strategy was the formation of a new centrality, corresponding to a permanent historical need of the city, in order to separate its modern part from its historical part.

Therefore, in its aims, it corresponded to the best that a MP should contain in order to be a true strategic plan, capable to impress on the future life and structure of the city at long periods.

Although responding in a big way to a modern conception of strategic planning³, however, the equipped axis project was influenced by some short comings which were not concerned itself (nor the designer engaged in it) but the theoretical and practical conception of the town planning which at that time was practiced; and which unfortunately - alas! – neither in the 40 years past since then has been able to renew itself in this country, as it could and as it should (like it has occurred in other countries).

I will try – in the space allowed – to concentrate my observations on those short comings on the same essential points. They go from the more specific to the more general, translating the question from the Rome equipped axis itself to more general question of planning theory and methodology.

1. the shortcomings of localization timeliness

² Since the unification of Italy, Rome has come out of its secular demographic stagnation, and begun its unrestrainable geometric demographic growth. (From 170,000 inhabitants in 1970 to 2,500,000 in 2001).

³That either it possesses strategic contents or it is not a planning meriting this name, but it reduced itself to a modest systematisation of the territory and a simple arrangement of spontaneous or micro territorial choices without a long-term vision, in a word, without an adequate strategy.

2. the shortcomings in respect to the city demographics and spatial growth registered or forecast able
3. the shortcomings of land use/transportation programming
4. the shortcomings of the assessment concerning the economic/operational feasibility (project engineering and financing)

Therefore, such points concern not so much the project in itself, but its framing – within the planning approach. A framing in general within which the projects of this kind – also optimal, suitable and necessary – should be both conceived and implemented.

2.Shortcoming of localization timeliness (historical outdatedness)

A first historical shortcoming of the MP has been that to localise the equipped axis late in respect to the evolution of the Rome urban growth for which it has been considered and partly designed (in the thirties and in the immediate post-war period).

It occurred in fact in Italy the so called ‘economic miracle’ with all its pro and cons. Rome in the sixties was very different from that of the pre-war: the population more than doubled, and the territory invaded everywhere in a disorderly manner. The localities selected for the equipped axis implementation (the axis between Pietralata and Centocelle and their surroundings) found themselves close at hand to the historical centre by then expanded and reaching these localities. The strategic aim or purpose according to which this equipped axis was conceived - to create an efficient alternative to the concentration and congestion of the historical centre - was becoming, on the contrary, a further factor of compacting and congestion of the centre itself by then spontaneously expanded.

To insist on that localization , meant to contradict – not pursue – the same strategy from which the equipped axis project was inspired and imprinted.

The locality where people thought to localise the equipped axis presented at that time some advantageous requirements which could facilitate the operations on behalf of the municipal authorities. Many areas indicated were already public areas (for instance an area still free of the airport of Centocelle) and anyway easily redeemable in the process of financial projecting which, inevitably, an operation of such dimensions must count on.

The growth of the city made already rapidly obsolete the area indicated for the expected effect and results. it rendered it moreover dangerous and unsuitable in pursuing these effects and results. The operation – even if always valid in itself and basically ‘strategic’ – deserved to be implemented, but displacing it in localities more distant from the centre more consonant to the size by then achieved by the city. And if wishing to keep the same direction - because considered opportune - it emerged at the eyes of many (among them myself) a more appropriate localisation at the level of the existing Highway Ring around

Rome at the cross road with via Tuscolana (where the metropolitan line A arrives now).

I do not believe that it is by chance that later in these localities and at such distance from the historical centre, in the next decades an urban agglomeration of settlements was created – actually, without a conscious plan - that can be considered a spontaneous formation of a Management/business Centre alternative to the historical centre. If this spontaneous expansion could be steered, coordinated, computed precisely and negotiated with individual operators with the same spirit which inspired the idea and project of the equipped axis, everyone involved, (municipal administration and corporations, operators and consumer-citizens and so on), would surely benefit of a decrease in costs and an increase in social and individual benefits; and would obtain an acceleration of the needed infrastructure.

On the contrary an amount of resources and settlements has been dispersed on the territory, which have complicated the accesses and the contradictions: in brief, the projecting which had inspired the idea and first implementation of the equipped axis has not been applied.

A curious point: this free area that people thought (in my opinion erroneously) could facilitate the implementation of the equipped axis, even if by then largely compromised by the casual land use disorder and by the absence of a plan⁴, today should be drastically reserved to a function quite opposed to that it was destined as an alternative centre. Today it should be rigorously kept free and with effort destined to be a *green area*. A breathing area capable of demarcating even more clearly the distance and the alternativeness of the new intensive agglomeration of services and offices from the historical centre, which was the *ratio* of the equipped axis.

3.Shortcoming of a more multi-centric vision of urban development

Another shortcoming of the 1965 MP was in the limited vision of the urban form. With the equipped axis an idea of urban growth was applied, based on ‘great traffic line’ concept, in turn tributary of a theory, – in that epoch very popular (even because it contained elements of un-doubtful utility and value) – of a ‘linear form’.

However, whatever could be the preference of an individual town planner for one or the other urban form, such preferences must be adapted to the physical structure and the dimensions of the city in question. A form ‘linear type’, like that of the equipped axis can be of great value if the city, on which it was needed to create an alternative centrality, could be a city of one million inhabitants, and if one should create only one alternative centrality, sufficiently balanced to contrast and modify the strong attractiveness of the historical one.

⁴ Which has been defined ‘inexistent’, with its numerous ‘variants’ aimed at running after and adjusting to a reality completely out of planning control.

But Rome in the sixties had reached more than two million and a half inhabitants and already was forecasting major growth. Another enucleation was being created even in a chaotic uncontrolled way, which although insufficient to divert the growth, was corresponding to the spread that one wish to rightly contrast. Moreover EUR already existed starting its march to become a true alternative centre of the south area of Rome, through which to 'rationalise' the presence of numerous settlements that the same MP had projected for the equipped axis. It seems that it was inevitable that this equipped axis could transform itself in a 'Western Management System' 'WMS', not only a unique alternative, but one alternative (first if you want) among others, in order to satisfy and rationalise the growth of settlements in the western area of the city. This was reinforcing the need to place the centre of gravity of the project more to the east, as said, whence to give it the function of a more defined catch-area or basin, on a wider demographic and territorial scale of the city. In sum, in the sixties the situation was already mature for a more multicentric vision of the urban system of Rome, within it the need of alternative centrality could take in account strategies analogous to that of the equipped axis, but extended to few and strong multiple centres as already seen in Progetto 80, foretold in the sixties on a national scale and the Plan of the Lazio Region and at the end of the seventies indicated (and later filed away in base of a rough pragmatism on behalf of the lefties policies in power themselves).

This pseudo-pragmatic vision has continued to take root in the left wing parties in all these years: with the refusal throughout the thirty years to study a new MP, of which all of us - with Bruno Zevi in the lead - reclaimed the urgency; and when finally at the end of Rutelli's Mayoral term people came (with an unexpected somersault), to accept the idea of a new MP; this has been narcotised with the 'micro projecting' making it to become a marmalade of little individual intervention without strategy. I refer overall to the alleged 'decentralisation' based around thirty little centres, absolutely incapable of constituting a valid alternative to the historical centre. In the face of this shortcoming of strategy, the equipped axis project with all its shortcomings, appeared to us still as the great and unique urban project in Rome since the end of the war to today.

4. The shortcoming of an integrated land use/transport vision

The third grave shortcoming - but this was substantially a grave shortcoming of the traditional urban planning, and not only of the Roman one - is that of the land use/transportation relation, i.e. the fact that the settlements or land uses are designed, evaluated and proposed before, and not after, having computed in the technical venue, the traffic generation that come from them. To turn over this approach and to make that the traffic generation be studied together, and contemporaneously with the land uses choices, it is a question which concerns, I repeat, all MP and the town planning methods in general. Not only, thus the planning processes at the single project scale.

However the equipped axis must be considered and structured on the analysis of transport demand which it could generate. It was not only a matter of computing the number of car parking space reserved for the residents in some areas or quarters, what is relatively obvious and easy (although far from being systematically practiced). But the equipped axis was a structural project of such wideness that it implicated a difficult but necessary (even if risky) computation of the traffic induced, for its own generation or for the infrastructure which it offered. The localisation of such impressive settlements and infrastructures cannot be and must not be decided without an evaluation of the traffic generation⁵.

But this question of a lack of integrated vision land use/transport offer the occasion to be scandalised for tenacy with which that vision is still today neglected by the town planning profession. (Tenacy, I repeat, which is derived from a strong conditioning factor in the only architectural education of the planners, at least in this country, and from the grave inadequacy of our university program dedicated to the education of planners)⁶.

If in the Anglo Saxon colleges this is taught at least from the beginning of the fifties (with the turn represented by the well known classical book of Mitchell and Raptkin of 1954⁷) even if with certain steadiness and limited extension by the practitioners, here in Italy I have the feeling that we are at the year zero, both in one case and in the other. And it seems to me urgent to find a remedy for this, if we wish that town planning achieves a minimum of credibility.

5. The shortcoming of economic programming in the implementation

But the most crucial shortcoming, which involves all the town planning culture in this country (and certainly cannot be imputed only to the designing of the equipped axis) is the shortcoming that survive until today (the new Rome MP is an example), is inherent to the conception of town planning itself, its role, its capacity to engrave on reality and to be truly a guideline for the physical and socio economic growth of the city. The first duty of any project designer or town planner, at the scale of the single building or of the entire city (and the same thing I could state if we pass even to the national or international or worldly scale) should be to render compatible and consistent his project or plan (whatever it may be) with the resources, means and instruments available to implement it, in given times and appropriated targets.

Since I think I am addressing mainly an architect audience, I ask: Can we imagine an architectural project approached without the knowledge of the order of

⁵ Probably such computation would have allowed an assessment from the beginning, in a more serious rather than only an intuitive way, the inadequacy of that localisation and the risk of compacting with the central area which one wanted to free up.

⁶ I have been challenging my colleagues for a long time, to make me aware of one MP in Italy that demonstrates to having decided the land use on the basis also on a quantitative (and not only generic and intuitive) evaluation of the traffic effect of its proposed choices and solutions. But in vain until now.

⁷ *Urban Traffic: a Function of Land Use*, Columbia University Press, 1954

magnitude of the material and financial resources that the project or plan can mobilise?

Can we imagine a project which does not close with its own *budget*, without a computed and preventative consistency with the available means and the consensus of the financial actors?

Do we think perhaps that the economic and financial constraints can be ignored at the beginning of the project itself that we are going to elaborate?

And then, why cannot this be done also for the town plans?

To the concept of plan or project is intrinsic the relationship and the interaction '*objective/means*' (that in the strategic programming venue is called a 'plan engineering') without which the plan does not deserve to be called plan, but is only a document of intention, of wishes, soon to be fatally translated in dreams and chattering.

The history and the circumstances or time will change by itself the objectives and means of whatever plan, and to impose adequate procedures of monitoring, revision, iteration. But if we begin with plans without a consistent evaluation of the means we will not even have the decisions, choices, options and targets to monitor, revise and update in a orderly way. We will never have the possibility to exercise what in the public and private economic activities is called 'management control' or, better still, 'strategic programming'. Without that we have only some wish lists and a chaotic management.

Is this what we wish to call 'planning'? Well, although absurd it could appear, this is what is done normally in the town planning field.

It is true, some glimpses of awareness in this field are highlighted here and there, especially in some urban administrations. But the ingrained habit of considering the urban development problem only from a viewpoint of physical and spatial management of spaces and buildings to locate in it, induce many to consider also the economic problem, yes very important, but to be approached 'later', in the 'implementation phase', in the 'current management'. While they must be considered a condition not only for the implementation itself of the physical and architectural projects and solutions, but for their design itself.

This is a very grave conceptual and mental shortcoming, which has discredited and destroyed town planning, and the thinking of town planning in itself. The shortcoming of an *integrated* vision of town planning in which the physical, environmental and the economic aspects could be studied and taken in account simultaneously in the full awareness of their inter-activity; from the one hand, it has disarmed the plans and physical project implementation, and from the other hand it has not even allowed to develop some investments and public expenditure at a suitable pace. This has been a support for the thesis of people - enemies of planning - who asserts that planning damaged the economic development.

And this wrong and limited concept of planning has obscured the fact that an integrated approach of planning would favour the canalisation of the economic investments along the line of planning, with solutions constrained by the available means which a method that have the requirements to associate in projecting the interests of the private choices, orienting them towards more rational, and so, in

the same time, more feasible solutions, if constrained to a process of mixed and arranged funding.

At the epoch (the sixties) it has been exactly the equipped axis which induced a group of economists, (of which I was part of, engaged in the aborted attempt of a national economic programming) to formulate the idea of a negotiation with some great investment centres (public and private) about the financial modality for the implementation of the equipped axis (in this way introducing a process of *project financing* which could have been an operational model of interest for many other cases)⁸. The proposal gave rise to a scandal from left and right wing: on the right hand, the people screamed about the danger of the public hand invading in a field of the private initiative, the unique source of efficiency and productivity; on the left hand, people screamed about the lese-majesty or sovereignty of the local autonomies (alas! also from the voice of many town planners connected with the traditional way of conceiving town planning.).

The proposal had been buried; and the equipped axis was also buried with it. Together with the MP itself, in its best and meaningful intentions.

It remained a day-to-day management, of the left and the right wing administrations, more or less honest depending on the type of go-getting administrators in which it succeeded; but it was nothing that resembled anything like planning, of which, moreover, its uselessness and its ineffectiveness was officially and arrogantly – from all angles – declared. It has been ‘theorised’ the absence of planning through methodological and linguistic acrobatics. Some school of thought took place, like the *structural* planning versus the *strategic* one, the *blue-print* planning versus the *negotiated* or *communicated* ones, *rational* planning versus *incremental* one etc.; revealing however a scant aptitude both for the language and the method.

And all this used in activities imbued by favouritism, populism, abusiveness and vandalism, homemade planning language, sewerage and garbage initiatives, various amnesties, and finally the ephemeral Roman summer fests(*panem et circenses*).

The Bruno Zevi Foundation has done well to put back into discussion – through the critical resuming of the case of the equipped axis - the present and future urban planning management policy. In fact one of the themes which Bruno Zevi never ceased - until the end of his days - to dedicate his biting and sever criticism to, has been exactly the way in which - throughout the years - the ‘planning- political system’ which has governed the city has numbed and obscured the strategic problem of the city.

With the new MP, things have not changed so much (I felt to explain this by adding a last chapter to the book in which I have illustrated the proposal for a new planning strategy for Rome, elaborated before it more than twenty perhaps thirty

⁸ A note of mine which circulated in those times, and in which was summarised the proposal, find to be published casually in a journal edited by Beniamino Finocchiaro, ‘Public Agencies, Public Corporations and Spatial Governance, A note on the implementation problem of the Rome Management Business Centre’ in: *Politica e Mezzogiorno*, Year VI, 1968

years ago)⁹. However, just because in the new MP there is not even any strategy – nor a wrong one, apart from a spread of centralities which cannot produce results but a strengthening of the historical centrality – it is possible to inject in it a new strategy.

Therefore it would not be futile to open and intensify a debate on it, rather than criticising the new MP, (where in some analytical parts it is quite reputable), but to examine if its not possible to integrate it, improve it exactly *from a strategic point of view*. This could be a good occasion to re-launch the kind of policy and projecting of the equipped axis – which I think must not be more than 4/5 (including the Roma-Sud Eur one) – with related ‘catchment areas’, in the same spirit, duly updated, from which, in the sixties, equipped axis was inspired.

⁹ In the book published this year by the English publisher Routledge. *Rome. A new planning strategy*, London 2005 to which I refer the scholar that wish to study in-depth my criticism on Roman and Italian town planning vicissitudes in the last forty years