

Il tracollo dell'urbanistica italiana

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# Il tracollo dell'urbanistica italiana

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'The collapse of Italian planning': the title of Leonardo Benevolo's last book, dedicated to the history of Italian planning after World War II (WWII) and to a discussion of its present and future perspectives, cannot be said to be overtly optimistic. Italy's best known and most translated architectural and urban historian, now well in his eighties (he was born in 1923), continues to regularly write books for Laterza, the publishing house he has been collaborating with for more than half a century. His publications have, in recent times, taken the form of pamphlets observing the recent transformations of Italy's territory from an increasingly pessimistic stance. Last year's book-length interview with journalist and preservation campaigner Francesco Erbani bore the title *The end of the city*.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these negative tones, it would be ill-advised to read *Il tracollo dell'urbanistica italiana* as a collection of grumbles from an old historian who, having directly participated to some of the key debates on Italian planning, seems now to think that less intellectually challenging times are about to come. In fact, Benevolo's book is interesting because of the way it finds a position in the growing body of literature on its subject. Although the relevant histories of post-WWII Italian planning still date from the 1980s and the 1990s, recent years have witnessed the publication of several autobiographical writings, first-hand accounts coming from such planners as Giuseppe Campos Venuti, Vezio De Lucia or Edoardo Salzano.<sup>2</sup> Benevolo's book is also, in many ways, an autobiography, as most of its source material is strictly connected to the author's personal experience, not only as a scholar but also as a practitioner. It is probably the first time that the historian Leonardo Benevolo allows the planner Leonardo Benevolo to come to the foreground in such an explicit way, punctuating with his personal remarks the bigger picture outlined in the book.

When discussing the difficulties faced by Italian planning in the decades after WWII, historians have often tended to evoke the failure to reform the 1942 planning law or the public powers' inadequacy to confront the increasing pressure of real estate speculation as two crucial factors.<sup>3</sup>

Benevolo's book adopts a different stance, one that insists less on laws and regulations and more on daily practice. In his views, the strength of post-1945 Italian planning lies in the experiences that many practitioners have been able to carry out in some specific contexts, while its weakness lies first of all in a difficulty to cumulate these experiences and learn from them.

This perspective allows Benevolo to propose a geography and a chronology of Italian planning that are partly original. The book outlines a tradition of good practices, experimented between the 1950s and the 1980s in such cities as Como, Brescia, Bologna, Ferrara, Modena, Urbino. The selection includes administrations of different political colours – 'red' Bologna, for example, but also 'white' Brescia – and tends to leave bigger cities out of the picture, implicitly suggesting that attempts to plan their growth have mostly failed, as was the case with the 1962 plan for Rome. These experiences have some things in common, most notably a well-articulated balance between policies for the conservation of the old city and policies for its expansion. No example of large-scale planning policy is discussed in detail in the book: Benevolo seems to consider planning as an activity that is mostly grounded in municipal life, a position that bears the echo of some of his previous historical works, most notably *The European city*,<sup>4</sup> with its insistence on urban self-government as the cornerstone of European (and Italian) identity. The reasons behind the crisis of the civic tradition outlined in the book are manifold. A deterioration of Italy's political and administrative culture seems to have hindered the most promising local initiatives after the 1980s. Planning culture has also its responsibilities, especially due to what Benevolo describes as an inclination for useless wordplay and a lack of interest for the study of the impact of planning actions. This is not to say that the trend cannot be reversed, and Benevolo concludes his book by formulating the hope that the implementation of the recent plan for Rome (2008) will provide a testing ground for a new season of municipal experiments.

At slightly more than 100-page length, *Il tracollo dell'urbanistica italiana* is too short a book to allow for a full development of its themes. Benevolo seems to suggest that Italy's trajectory is original compared to the situation of other European countries, but where the orig-

inality lies is partly unclear, especially since the difficulties faced by some Italian cities in recent times would appear to be not so different from what happens in other, very different contexts. Nevertheless, the book can be read as a significant example of the growing concern, in Italy's public debate, for the alterations brought to the country's built and natural heritage.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, although the judgments formulated on some recent experiences may appear too harsh and not adequately articulated, it will be difficult for architects and planners to easily dismiss this powerful call for action.

Notes

1. *Leonardo Benevolo, La fine della città*, interview with Francesco Erbani, *ibid.* 2011.
2. The three autobiographies have been reviewed by Cristina Renzoni, "Book reviews," *Planning Perspectives* 26, no. 2 (2011): 320 – 22.
3. Giorgio Piccinato, "A Brief History of Italian Planning after 1945," *Town Planning Review* 81, no. 3 (2010): 237 – 59.
4. *Leonardo Benevolo, The European City*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.
5. *Salvatore Settis, Paesaggio costituzione cemento. La battaglia per l'ambiente contro il degrado civile*. Turin: Einaudi, 2010.