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Projecting decisions. The architectural design practice in the folds of decision-making processes

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## Summary

The decision-making processes of complex urban and architectural transformations – dependent on several implications and actors – have a high degree of uncertainty, in the process itself and in the outcomes. However, this kind of complexity is often accounted as a linear process of subsequent steps and decisions, from the cause to the effect, from the project to its execution. Since projects rarely move forward – undisturbed and without detours – to buildings, how is it possible instead to take account of their diversions, as constituent elements of the decision-making process? In order to witness the *folds* of architectural design, a shift in perspective makes it possible to grasp and to trace it in a pragmatic way, by following the practice.

The opportunity to unfold an architectural design process occurred for me in the involvement – over two years – in the project team of the *Masterplan* of Politecnico di Torino, an ongoing transformation process of its urban campuses, to outline alternative transformation strategies, expansion scenarios and qualification processes. Shifting the attention from the material products of architecture – such as buildings – to the processes of emergence, deviation, negotiation and finalization of projects, this work traces a taxonomy of several actors interacting in a complex process. Since not only drawings, models, and projects, but also note taking of project team's members, reports, meetings, e-mail and whatsapp exchanges, are examined – exploring the pragmatic connections between these practices and their outcomes – this research problematizes an internal and situated perspective, which it would not have been possible to report without having been *in the folds* of the process.

Consequently, the main aim of the research is an investigation – from the inside – on the role of some architectural design practices in relation to the ongoing decision-making processes, by exploring the connections between these practices and their results and effects. The hypothesis is that design documents played a

role in the decisions taken, and allowed, in certain problematic moments, to overcome the conflicts by negotiating different positions and needs.

In deepening these aspects, the thesis follows two different strands of research. On the one hand, by positioning within a disciplinary debate about the definition of architectural design research as a scientific field, through an investigation on practices informed by Science and Technology Studies, Actor Network Theory and ethnographies of architecture. On other hand, with an interdisciplinary interest towards methods of analysis on decision-making processes, with particular reference to the entities involved, their role in the process and their interactions, as in Soft Operational Research and Problem Structuring Methods.

In this, the main research question is addressed through the specification and deepening of several subtasks in which the overall objective is articulated. First of all, the thesis aims at following and narrating the process to capitalize an operative experience – starting from an internal point of view – in *theoretical* and discussable terms, to be reconducted to the above-mentioned intertwining among disciplines. Secondly, a further purpose in pursuing the exploration of the role of architectural design practices is defining a *methodology* to grasp architectural design practice in order to unfold and to trace the entities involved, their role and their interactions and to link them to the effects in the decision-making process. Finally, an ultimate end of this research is to provide an *operative tool* as a necessary condition to fully understand the significance of the research itself.

The research's aims – following the practice – are pursued by defining a mapping methodology of the process as a sequence of actions and effects with recognizable relations. Starting from it and trying to capture events that gain specificity in their own moments of occurrence, it seeks to define if – following and tracing the project operations in a process observed at the scale of daily practice – it is possible to identify some crucial points, operative strategies and tactics as they influence the decision-making level. Furthermore, reflections emerge on the role of architectural design practices in both embodying the entities unfolded in the process, and conducting instrumentally to realizable courses of action, in *projecting decisions* on the basis of spatialization.