

Futures Digging Up Present: Towards the New General Regulatory Plan of Turin

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***PRG •  
back-  
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projects***

# Futures Digging Up Present: Towards the New General Regulatory Plan of Turin

**Valerio Della Scala**

## *Abstract*

The paper explores some strategies adopted by the city of Turin's urban planning team in drafting the update of the General Regulatory Plan (henceforth PRG). In particular, it analyzes how a backcasting approach is used to counterbalance the time mismatch between a series of ongoing structural urban interventions, which are the result of a huge public investment, and the slow and cumbersome process for the approval of the new Plan. It is in this misalignment that lies the core of a work composed of pilot projects, forecast scenarios and projective models; all "anticipatory tools" through which transformations are oriented toward a certain idea of the future. Through three case studies – three of the anticipatory projects mentioned above – the article examines this approach, also providing some critical reflections on the methodologies adopted in relation to the objectives.

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**1 - The Department is named: "P.R.G., Urbanistica, Edilizia privata, Coordinamento Grandi Progetti, Grandi Infrastrutture nel settore Trasporti".**

**2 - The most important effect of this so far has been the integration of thematic issues pertaining to strategic development for the city into educational programs, defining a 'chain' of curricular laboratories (called Scenario Torino). The primary interest of the operation is to provide experimental scenarios that the Department of City Planning struggles to produce internally.**

*Dealing with different time magnitudes in the development of a regulatory plan*

"If time is not a neutral container in which objects float, but is instead an emission of objects themselves, it is at least theoretically more plausible that an object could exert a backward causality on other entities" (Morton, 2013: 93).

A series of ongoing activities aimed at a defined course of actions to achieve a previously alluded future. This is how to describe, in a nutshell, the design project. Simply put, it entails striking a balance between present-day realities and future aspirations, a theme that lingers in all facets of design, including public design.

Through an analysis of the current work of the Turin's Department of City Planning<sup>1</sup> in drafting the new city PRG, this paper explores some of the issues of public urban design in relation to the dyscrasia between administrative, design and implementation timeframes that characterizes many current planning processes. This interest takes its cues from a recent intensification of exchanges between the project team of the new PRG and the Department of Architecture and Design of the Politecnico di Torino<sup>2</sup>. Such an exchange provides fertile ground for critical investigation on some of the major challenges in relation to the urban transformation of Turin; a challenge that probably is similar to other cities characterized by analogous processes, within a framework that enables a reasoning deeply related to the "Ardeh" #14 "Time."

The paper starts both from an assumption (I) and a main question (II).

(I) The PRG, among other things, identifies conditions and builds limits to reach a specific desirable urban future (as indicated by the political agenda), by orienting transformative possibilities through regulatory tools within a certain time.

Yet, for many reasons, the schedule for the plan approval is becoming increasingly complex in Italy: the lack in public investments (which is a structural issue, not a contingent one, as explained below); the overlapping of administrative competencies and the consequent 'bounce-back' procedures; a high level of economic uncertainty, and a rising dependency on private initiative; the crisis of consensus. Not to mention issues pertaining to the outdated boundaries of

the current plan, such as a recurring use of derogation for new interventions that complicates analytical and forecasting work.

However, despite such uncertain prospects, the PRG work implies assumptions on a future state of things as a retro-causal object. In other words, thinking retrospectively from a hypothetical future and moving backward from there. Then, in planning tasks “significantly more ideas were generated in the retrospective thinking mode than in the prospective mode” (Rollier, Turner, 1994: 169).

(II) Notwithstanding these aspects, what strategies are being put in place to counteract the entropy that interferes during the plan development phases? How do they work, in case?

Through the analysis of some case studies, the article seeks to answer how the project team applies tactics to exert a form of reverse causality on other entities. This means that while these entities emerge as outcomes of a specific plan or hypothesis, they should also serve as contributing factors to the realization of that plan.

The article uses interviews with one of the project team’s members and official municipal documents as primary sources (mainly resolutions called “deliberazione” in Italy), both in their final and draft versions. Their systematization, made also by the use of diagrams, becomes the basis for a critical analysis of the methodologies implemented by the team.

#### *“Retro-future planning”*

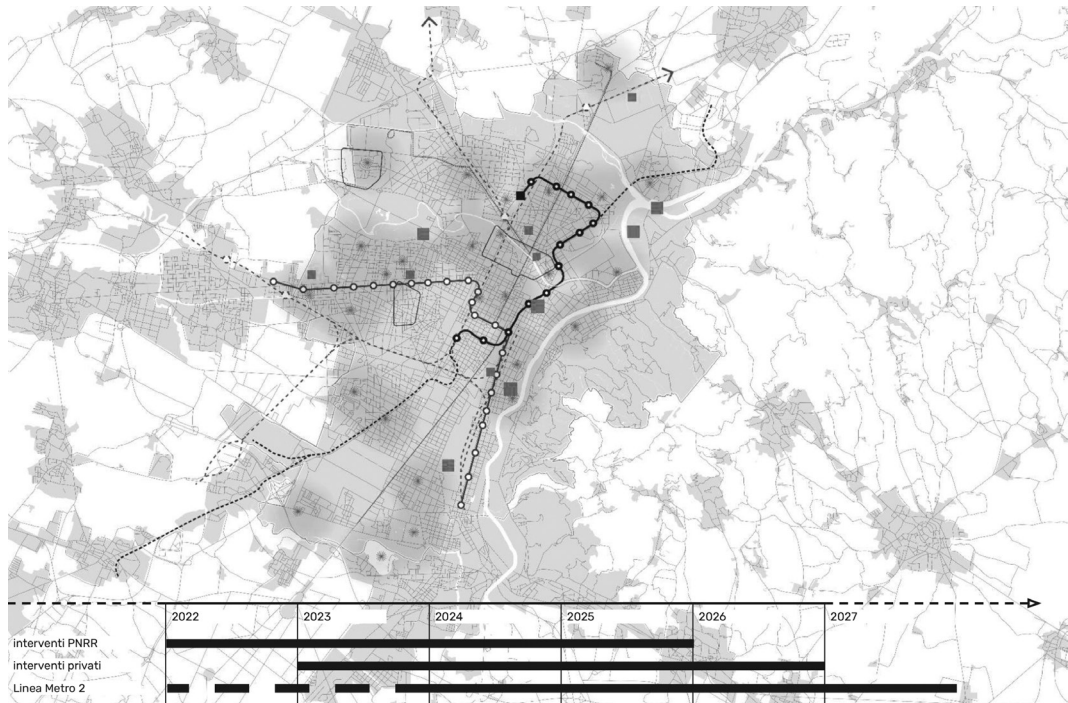
The city of Turin is going through a new season of major urban transformation, perhaps the most significant since the 2006 Winter Olympics. Today’s driving force is not an international event, but rather the concomitance of the allocation of public funding from both the Italian government and the EU (approximately 3.5 billion, mainly coming from the PNRR, the Italian investment plan included in the Next Generation EU program), and the preliminary stages for the new PRG. These are different and formally unrelated trajectories: the first is an opportunity Turin is taking advantage of, while the second stems from a long, intentional administrative process, which has been further accelerated by new projects arriving in the city. There are elements of significant discontinuity

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The interventions envisaged by the PNRR are under stringent time constraints and must be completed between mid- and late 2026.

from the recent past. On one hand, public funds are being allocated, for better or worse, to support infrastructural and urban investments in ways that are difficult to quantify compared to previous years. On the other hand, the Municipality is attempting to update its primary urban planning tool for the first time in nearly three decades. In addressing the current challenges, the article will refrain from delving into the intricacies of the existing plan, a significant initiative at national level conceived by Vittorio Gregotti and Augusto Cagnardi that took effect in 1995, pioneering for its time. However, it is essential to highlight the growing obsolescence of that plan, a recurrent issue, as evidenced by the pervasive reliance on regulatory variants to navigate its increasing inadequacies in meeting today's evolving demands. Cagnardi himself underscored this concern in a recent interview with journalist Paolo Varetto (2023).

However, on a procedural level the reason why it is difficult to take action on updating plans (it is as much a regional as a national problem) is mainly that urban planning regulations are very outdated and require extremely complex and sometimes anachronistic processes, especially concerning the phenomena occurring in the city. The extensive lack of investment, which lasted for decades, affected the implementation of planning forecasts in a predetermined way. It is especially on this separation between PRG and structural investments that the Italian landscape differs from other European cases (such as France or northern European countries). Hence, the current conjuncture was certainly a determining factor in the administration's decision to focus on the renewal of the PRG during the last election campaign in 2021. It might seem to be solely an advantage, to leverage a massive amount of resources to define new lines of transformation. Yet, one should also consider the difficulties of a cumbersome approval process, in which the timeline of the ongoing interventions – whether as part or not part of PNRR – should align with the approval of the new plan. This is a wicked problem that calls into question different spheres, in which *time* its crucial node. The interventions envisaged by the PNRR are under stringent time constraints and must be completed between mid- and late 2026. The final approval of the new planning scheme is estimated



later, with only the preliminary phase expected to be completed within the same timeframe of PNRR projects. Moreover, the mandatory regional approval of the city PRG implies a series of dialogical and council-based steps that tend to further extend the process. The impact of such a legislative process can be huge, since the Department of City Planning of the City of Turin has high expectations to innovate the approach on urban parameters and standards with the new plan, within the limits set by the Regional Law 56 of 1977 (“on land protection and land use”). To sum up, there is the risk of a mismatch between the deadlines of ongoing projects, many of which are considered strategic in the new PRG, and its approval. Although the City Council intends to match the electoral mandate with ongoing investments, these projects compose a constellation of unconnected interventions in a broader systematization framework, where such a framework could not be formalized within the expected timeframe.

That said, what is the main challenge for the project team in drafting the new PRG? Councilor Paolo Mazzoleni has recently used the term “Retro-future planning” to describe what the team is attempting:

**Fig. 1 - Torino, map of investments 2022-27.** The image spatializes the major interventions that will take place in the city in the near future. These are processes independent of the PRG, which, however, the project team aims to integrate into an overall strategic design (Credits: Città di Torino, Urbanistica, Edilizia privata, Coordinamento Grandi Progetti, Grandi Infrastrutture nel settore Trasporti).

**3 - Paolo Mazzoleni, public lecture on the project Scenario Torino at the Politecnico di Torino, on 16 October 2024.**

**4 - The concept was made explicit by Caterina Quaglio, Consultant for Bloomberg Associates, who is currently collaborating with the City of Turin on the drafting of the new City Masterplan. Caterina Quaglio was interviewed by the author on two occasions, on 17 October 2024 - when this issue was discussed - and on 21 November 2024.**

observing the map of current transformations and reweaving them, the plan derives and builds upon existing investments, yet taking into account a partially outlined future<sup>3</sup>.

Beyond the rhetoric one chooses, this issue actually involves the implementation of working methodologies akin to *backcasting*. This might seem like a fairly common thing for designers as well as for creatives in general, considering it has been researched from long time both from a cognitive point of view and in the decision-making applications (Anthony et al., 1993; Einhorn, Hogarth, 1987; Zimmerman et al., 2022). Yet, this approach becomes particularly relevant here because, as we will see, it comes through the introduction of new code strings, either temporary or permanent (Fig. 1).

In Turin, the activity of the project team also passes through temporary tactics designed both to experiment and to produce intermediate results while pursuing specific directions. This should allow pilot tests of tomorrow's city, and anticipate transformative possibilities.

To provide practical examples, three cases that fall under this operational mode of “forerunners projects”<sup>4</sup> are presented below.

#### *Chasing the escape velocity: three “forerunners projects”*

The projects concern different issues and fields. The first one, the so-called “Delibera 106” (“delibera” is the Italian word for “resolution”), regards the introduction of new criteria in the evaluation process for the derogatory building permit license, based on an assessment of the quality of the design proposal; “Usi Temporanei,” the second one, has the same legal form and concerns a new conception of temporary uses; the last one, ‘Fuori’, aims to define a new methodology of analysis and design for public space.

The cases are set out firstly through a description of the object and scope, with their regulatory framing – based on the official documentation and complemented by graphic schemes – followed by some critical reflections.

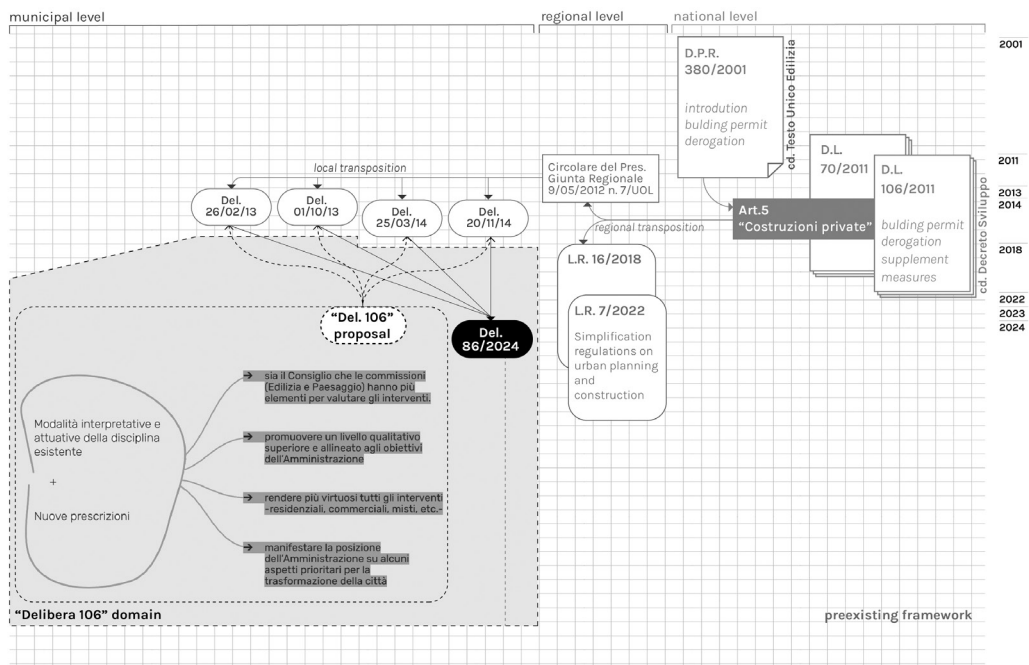
### Case study 1: “Delibera 106”

The derogatory building permit was introduced in Italy in 2001, with the so-called “Testo Unico Edilizia” (transl. Consolidated law on construction - D.P.R. 380), then complemented in 2011 with the so-called “Development Decree” (Legge 106/2011).

At the local level, in addition to two Regional Laws (16/2018; 7/2022), the measure criteria were specified by the City of Turin through four resolutions introduced between 2013 and 2014. These define areas for the application (such as interventions with urban planning value that can be assimilated to Executive Urban Planning Tools, calculation methods for quantifying the economic contribution for urban regenerations, etc.).

So far derogation has been used, in Turin and elsewhere, mainly as a countermeasure in cases where the current plan did not support new transformations, if these were deemed to be of public interest. Thus, the measures concerned mainly a scope of application, rather than introducing qualitative criteria upon which to base the evaluation process itself. And, as we will see, this last aspect contains the most relevant elements of the Delibera 106.

Fig. 2 – “Delibera 106” diagram, the scheme illustrates the relationship between the process of constructing Resolution 106 and the supra-local legislative framework (Elaboration by the author). \*Excerpt from a public presentation document of the resolution.



\*Excerpt from a public presentation document of the resolution

In fact, as it can be deduced from a presentation document, the idea behind it is to act on the tracks of the four aforementioned resolutions, consolidating some of their lines according to the qualitative points (such as: working on the quality of design proposals; promoting a high degree of energy and environmental sustainability; strengthening the evaluation process by the Building or Landscape Commission). More specifically, the main proposed additions reclassify the types of interventions allowed in derogation to two categories: “Construction,” or actions that intervene on the existing building stock, and “Intervention with urban planning value,” assimilated to executive urban planning instruments. Moreover, also the regeneration fee is affected, in all cases of issuance of building permits in derogation (as well as the possibility for the City to require specific urbanization works to offset the charges). The proposal became effective in February 2024 (Deliberazione del Consiglio Comunale 86/24) (Fig. 2).

The interest of the resolution for the purposes of this analysis is primarily the ultimate goal on which each integration seems to be structured, namely the establishment of new criteria for evaluating requests for building permits in derogation. Indeed, these seem to produce a potential scrap from the previous state of things. Delibera 106 is in fact “dictated by the importance of working on the quality of project proposals – heterogeneous and located in complex areas of the city.” Although “quality” may seem a liable theme, by reading the resolution (*ibid.*), it takes on bold contours: “the evaluation will pay particular attention to the relationship of the design proposal with the surrounding urban fabric and its reconnection value, to the recompositing of urban frontages in [...] and, more generally, to the quality of the design of open spaces.” Moreover, “projects will have to demonstrate, through a technical report accompanied by appropriate documentation, the achievement of a level of energy and environmental sustainability above the minimum level required by current regulations.” Rather than judging the criteria *per se*, it is relevant here to point out how the Department of City Planning seeks to use an existing “exception” norm to steer urban transformations in a certain way. A tool, which was originally conceived as a generic normative case,

is here detailed as a vehicle for coordinating some of the licensing. In other words, “targeting” the derogatory building permit to make it instrumental to a particular planning strategy.

This appears as the main discriminating factor with respect to the past: “having formalized what resided in a negotiation between Municipality and proposer, where such a formalization can determine a specific type of effects”.<sup>5</sup>

It is difficult to assess its results, as it is a very recent measure. However, the fact that it became effective more than two years after the current administration took office means that the resolution may absorb the most recent regulatory guidelines. This may help to hold together contingencies emerged in the course of the planning action and programmatic lines that have been predesignated.

*Case study 2: “Usi Temporanei” (temporary uses)*

Although the second case has the same legal structure as the first, it was created a couple of years earlier and went into effect in June 2022, with the Deliberazione del Consiglio Comunale 444. Therefore, some examples of the use of this measure can be analysed, even though there are still a few cases.

A large amount of underutilized building stock is the main issue, which has been observed in many Italian cities. Overly strict and prescriptive planning regulations, especially those pertaining to changes in building use, impede their transformation. This problem is exemplified by Turin’s current urban plan, which has almost reached the limit of its ability to bring about the required changes.

The purpose of this measure is to encourage the reactivation of underutilized heritage sites by simplifying and framing interventions for uses that differ from those originally outlined in the Plan. The method employed is temporary use, allowing for a duration of three years with the possibility of an extension for an additional two years. As noted in the resolution, this approach aligns with a provision in legislation, specifically the Consolidated Text on Construction. This text allows for temporary uses of “public and private buildings in a state of degradation, abandonment, or underutilization for initiatives of significant public interest of limited duration, which may have

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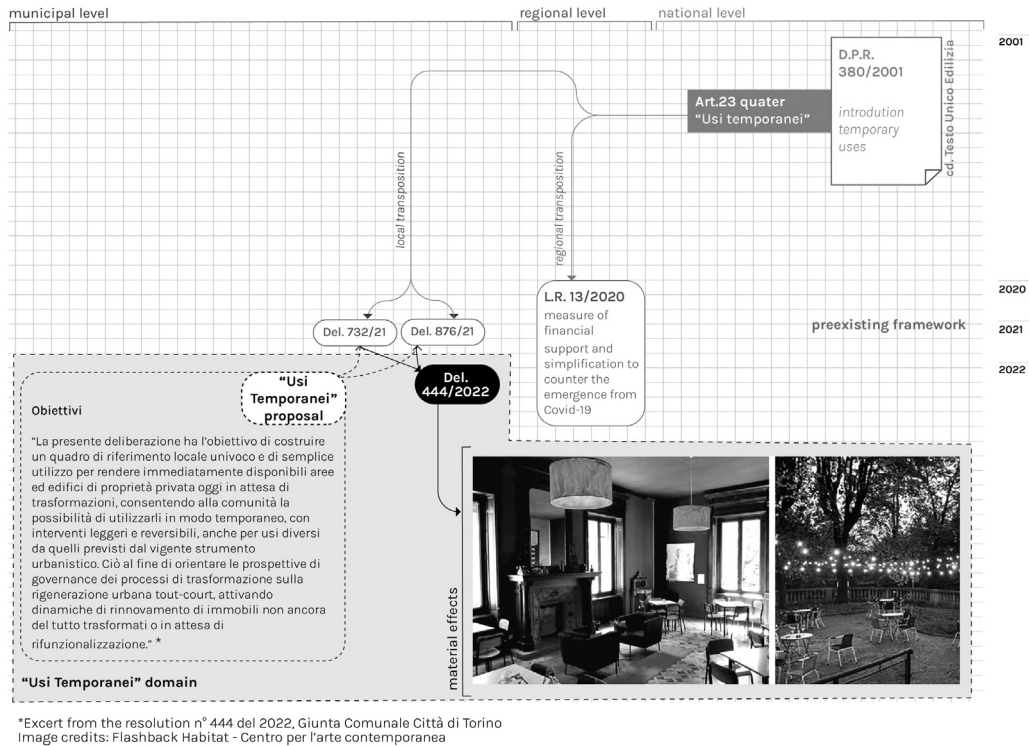


Fig. 3 – “Usi Temporanei” diagram, the scheme outlines the definition of the resolution on temporary uses in relation both to the supra-local legislative framework and to one of the material effects produced by this measure so far (Elaboration by the author). \*Excerpt from the resolution 444/22, City of Turin; image credits: Flashback - Centro per l'arte Contemporanea.

**6 - Art. 23-quater..  
Transl. by the  
author**

regenerative potential”.<sup>6</sup> Locally, this opportunity has been introduced through policies at both the regional and municipal levels for several years. Regionally, financial support and simplification measures were implemented in response to the Covid-19 emergency (Piedmont Regional Law May 29, 2020, No. 13). At the municipal level, the council has reacted by adopting two resolutions in 2021 (Deliberazione del Consiglio Comunale 732 and 876) to allow greater flexibility regarding the uses of areas and buildings compared to what is stipulated in the current Plan. As said, some areas and artifacts have already benefited from the resolution on Temporary Uses. In particular, the Department of City Planning often refers to the emblematic case of “Flashback,” an art gallery built in a historic building on the Turin hills, owned by Cassa Depositi e Prestiti (the national financial institution that supports infrastructural development and public administrations’ investments). But there are other interesting cases, such as the new post office in Piazza Don Pollarolo, in the Vallette neighborhood, which is actually the first application of the tool on a

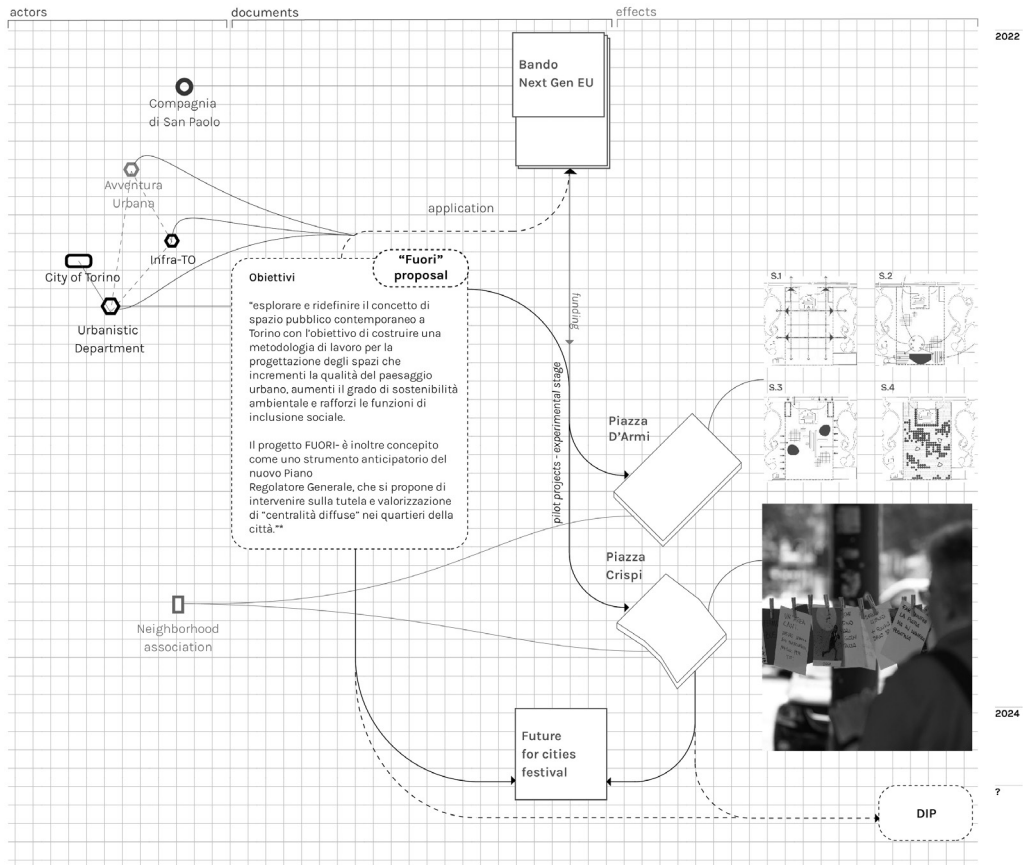
private vacant area, owned by the “Agenzia Territoriale per la Casa” (Regional Agency for Housing) (Fig. 3). That of Temporary Uses is undoubtedly an anticipatory tool, like Resolution 106, and they both attempt to partially defuse the current Plan’s rigidities. However, the purpose that guided the definition of Temporary Uses is different: rather than orienting things according to specific qualitative criteria, the attempt here is to widen the transformative margin and to let new uses and practices point to possible ways. Rather than starting with a scenario, here are supported actions that produce new ones, allowing the municipality to test unedited relationships between functions and specific areas, settlement patterns and the impact of specific economies on the territory. In this sense, temporariness can become a functional exploratory pick for the new Plan, obviously having to pass through the constraint of community interest. In other words, the municipality here can test content (the uses) and modalities (the process), but also – and it is a non-trivial aspect – “alternative forms of synergy between public and private.”<sup>7</sup>

*Case study 3: “Fuori – L’esterno pubblico della città”*  
(the public outward of the city)

The last case differs from the previous in terms of process, expected outputs, current stage, and actor-network. The starting point is the consideration that a large part of the city’s public areas no longer meet contemporary spatial and functional needs. This awareness emerged during the post-pandemic phase, accelerating analyses on models of public space concerning new relationships between users and uses. “Fuori” follows this wake, and aims to build a new design methodology based on the understanding of today’s relational dynamics in the use of such spaces, and on the establishment of guidelines co-designed with experts and citizens.

A specificity of the project is its extensive and heterogeneous network, which in this specific case includes local philanthropic entities (Compagnia di San Paolo), territorial and public ones (the City Council, InfraTO) but also local associations, district groups, and a private agency dealing with urban innovation (Avventura Urbana). In this sense, the assumptions of the project could be replicated more broadly and involv-

**7 - Caterina Quaglio, interview with the author, 21 November 2024.**



\*Excerpt from the application document for the competition "Future for Cities - Fuori" (WILL) Assessorato Urbanistica, Edilizia privata, Coordinamento Grandi Progetti, Grandi Infrastrutture nel settore Trasporti (Città di Torino) Image credits: InfraTO

**Fig. 4 – "Fuori"** diagram, schematization of the process, from the public call to the spatial and documental effects (Elaboration by the author). \*Excerpt from the application document for the competition "Future for Cities - Fuori", Assessorato Urbanistica, Edilizia Privata, Coordinamento Grandi Progetti, Grandi Infrastrutture nel settore Trasporti (City of Turin); image credit: InfraTO.

**8 - Caterina Quaglio, ibid.**

ing particular actors, depending on the opportunities. This process is still under development, but it has already led to some outcomes by taking advantage of the second edition of the Next Generation EU call (December 2022). Through that program, the municipality obtained funds to begin testing the aforementioned mode of operation with two pilot projects, one on Piazza Crispi and the other in Piazza d'Armi. The core of the project is to use public space as a "welfare activator,"<sup>8</sup> focusing heavily on moving places for socialization and collective life outside, and also as a tool to counter problems of degradation and conflicts among users in some areas. In addition to defining a new design methodology, there are two other purposes highlighted by the Department of City Planning that tie in with our general reflection: first, to strengthen competencies and skills

within the administration based on the know-how generated during the work; second, also considering this as an anticipatory tool, to produce DIPs (design guidance documents) that will guide subsequent investments and projects on public areas (Fig. 4).

In particular, the latter is related to the aspect of “forerunners projects.” It could be said that “Fuori” stands somewhere between the two previous examples: while it aims to delimit types of intervention on a qualitative and processual basis (affinity with “Delibera 106”), in this fine-tuning phase it aims to gain a new understanding of elements on which to base that delimitation (affinity with “Usi Temporanei”) – especially based on analyses of the relationships between users and spaces, and of the priorities that citizens assign to such spaces, this therefore serves as a tool with true anticipatory potential.

#### *Is it possible to flatten torsions? Further reflections*

How to plan for an “away” when there is no “away” left (?) asked Timothy Morton in “Hyperobjects” (2013: 31), reflecting on the exhaustion of the concept of “world” and the crisis of the modern paradigm. That “away” can be understood both as a physical dimension and as a temporal one: what conception of the future remains once the positivist paradigm and its presupposed infinite horizon of growth have been exhausted?

Despite having this awareness, designers involved in planning often discount a general conception of things still hinged on modern paradigms. The fact that planning models need to be redefined is quite clear, both inside and outside the academy. Yet, it remains very complex to promote urban scenarios that defuse some of the principles of non-contradiction (Morton, 2016) that underlie contemporary ecological issues.

All of this has to do with the temporal sphere, and the issues emerging from this analysis are structured around questions such as: how to manage the protracted timeframe of plan implementation with the short timeframe of supra-local funded projects? What is the horizon to consider (when every horizon you try to set is slippery)? What model of development and transformation to pursue if the city is declining demographically? How to communicate assumptions for future generations, in cities that are suffering greatly from aging? These are just a few of the possible questions, but

What conception of the future remains once the positivist paradigm and its presupposed infinite horizon of growth have been exhausted?

What model of development and transformation to pursue if the city is declining demographically?

they give an idea of the huge difference in the approach to time between those who plan today (here, as well as in other European countries) versus those who did so in the past. Inside this state of uncertainty about data and elements on which to base the work, we have witnessed attempts to hold together “retroactions” from a future horizon – though more blurred than in the past – and unseen scenarios produced by new settlement patterns. In such cases, designers and planners need to navigate in a highly precarious condition where time cannot be considered as a line on which to deploy chronoprograms, but rather as a series of concentric layers to produce deferred effects that bounce between them. This tactical approach is grafted at the intersection of political, strategic, and technical dimensions and is strictly related to a dyscrasic juncture generated by the stratification of timeframes and administrative competence. Proceeding by “grafts” could be a partial countermeasure to this dyscrasia that will continue to characterize project activity, both public and private. In this sense, tools such as those outlined here, if properly supported at the policy level, could potentially define the perimeter of today’s actions by favoring the achievement of certain results in the medium term. What remains to be understood is whether, in such an approach, a functional balance among the many punctual operations can be achieved. That is, whether the many temporalities that come into play can resonate with each other, fostering an organic urban development.

### *Acknowledgments*

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