

URBAN CENTER FOR URBAN REGIONS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES  
TO REFLECT UPON A NEW URBAN QUESTION

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**Abstract**

*Since 2005 the Province of Milan has fostered and experienced a process of experimentation in urban governance and public policies, under the name of the “Strategic Project Città di Città”. In fact through this experimental approach to planning, the Province has tried to play an important role in different directions: (1) producing and offering local society a frame for interpretation of social, economical, political and territorial processes occurring in a complex context, on in which complexity and articulation require new descriptive tools in order to interpret and deal with current trends, transformations and scenarios; (2) activating, empowering, discovering the multiple design and innovation resources of local societies able to renew, on the base of their different “intelligence” forms, modes, contents of public action; (3) building and discussing a new frame for action, through a vision, based on new strategies, able to conjugate the issue of competitiveness and that of quality of life and livability and to foster new projects, able to work on these new challenges.*

*On the base of an evaluation of the outcomes of the project, the paper presents and discuss the results of an exploratory study aimed at discussing the premises and the opportunity to establish a “Metrocenter”(urban center with a metropolitan perspective) for Milan urban region, intended as a “tool” able to consolidate the innovations produced by the process in the manifold directions above mentioned. The constitution of a urban center for the urban region will be seen in particular as an occasion to transform innovative episodes of planning into a new governance culture (Healey, 2007). In particular the paper, trying to investigate the specific context conditions (problems, available resources...) as well as the premises and results of other similar experiences in international contexts, will focus on the nature of these new governance tools ( Lascoumes & Le Galés, 2004) and try to propose a reflection on their capacity to open a new public space, able respond to the plea for new models of public action.*

**Keywords**

Urban center  
Urban regions  
Governance tool  
Local  
Actor

## **1. CONTEXT CONDITIONS/1.**

### **A process of strategic planning challenging the context.**

Between 2005 and 2009, the Province of Milan has promoted, in collaboration with Politecnico di Milano, Department of architecture and Planning, and Milano Metropoli, a public local development agency at provincial level, a process of strategic planning. Under the title “Progetto Strategico Città di Città”, this process has been proposed as a relevant occasion to interpret and discuss ongoing processes of territorial transformation and to experience possible innovations in the field of public policies. In particular the project has focused upon three field of activities and related research hypothesis:

- (1) Producing and offering to local societies new interpretative frameworks of social, economical, territorial processes of change in the city and the urban region, meant as a complex territorial context, whose articulation asks for **new modalities of description and interpretation;**
- (2) Promoting and enhancing the rich, plural, differentiated resources of local societies, trying to treat the problem of decision making fragmentation as a resource for project, laying on the hypothesis that the **intelligence of society can contribute to renew form, modes, contents of public action;**
- (3) **Building and discussing a vision**, based on new strategies, able to couple competitiveness imperatives to those of quality of life and social and territorial cohesion, promoting, selecting and fostering projects able to improve the livability and habitability of the urban region.

In this perspective, within this strategic approach to planning, the Project has tried to cope with some of the most relevant challenges of planning in contemporary cities, as shown by a quick overlook to some of the most interesting current urban planning experiences (see on this in particular the recent works of Patsy Healey, but also recent planning processes in the Paris-Ile De France region, in Madrid, in Stockholm, in Helsinki, in London), all dealing with the necessity of producing new interpretations of the urban phenomenon, new urban visions, a new governance culture.

At the end of a process of four years, which has been fed by position documents (proposing interpretative images of the context); processes of public interaction (through different editions of an idea competition aiming at intercepting new projects and ideas for the future of the urban region), the screening of the Province’s activities able to build a livable urban context and the selection and construction-promotion of Pilot-projects at the intersection between local societies proposals and provincial competences; occasions of public discussion (fostered by confrontation promoted also within the framework of a public exposition dedicated to the process and a number of project workshops), the process seems to have reached some important results and

evidenced some further directions of research and reflection. Both locally, both on a more general level<sup>1</sup>.

In fact, **from a local perspective**, the relevance of the issue of livability has entered the public discussion and agenda as well as a large debate and interest have been fostered by the interpretations provided of the urban context, read as a large *urban region*, integral part of a wider conurbation in the northern Italian territory. At the same time the emergence of a territorial formation articulated and differentiated in its parts (*cities of cities*) and the availability of important social resources and interest of the local societies in investing and cooperating with institutions in the production of a livable urban region, has produced interesting pressures within the institutional milieu, not simple to be treated and managed within the traditional attitude towards the treatment of the nexus territoriality/sovereignty/ citizenship.

**In between a local perspective and a more general one**, focusing on the challenges of planning in contemporary city, three issues at least can be selected in this sense among the others, which will constitute three constituting elements of the reflections proposed in the following paragraphs:

1. *The production and public discussion of interpretative images and scenarios of change for Milan urban region has been largely appreciated and regarded with great expectations by a wider public.* These expectations and interest witness about the shared necessity of a *knowledge framework* throughout local society. An expectation which is not only typical of the Milan case. Understanding tensions, problems, resources available is a central and hard challenge for actors within this urban region: mayors, councilors, citizens, third sector actors, entrepreneurs seen to be hardly affected in their everyday practice by the lack of information and the uncertainty of processes of transformations affecting their context. Lacking information, they lament problems in framing their choices, actions, decisions within a general background. Sense-making operations like those fostered through the public discussion of interpretative images built upon the interpretation of data and trends, seem to be essential both for public action and private, both for collective and individual action. In this sense similar kind of operations produce common goods. Though Milan urban region hosts several universities and research centers, the impression is that technical expertise and knowledge remain compressed inside the limited research milieu, or the institutional ones; they hardly enter a diffuse public arena discussion and reflection. The scarcity and strategic importance of knowledge for action in a condition of uncertainty and fragmentation is thus a first issue upon which the Strategic Project has “opened the box”. In this sense the Milan case highlights once again **the relevant (though fragile) role knowledge (in particular expert knowledge) has in contemporary life**, in order to deal with the growing complexity and condition of uncertainty life is made of. What in particular is interested to be observed and commented is the role planning experts can play and the way in which knowledge is produced and used inside planning processes. We are in fact assisting to different models and approach which vary relevantly in different

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<sup>1</sup> All materials can be downloaded and consulted on the website [www.cittadicitta.it](http://www.cittadicitta.it)

situations, where on the one side we have processes of production of interpretative scenarios aiming at producing public discussion and reflections, on the other with processes in which scenarios are provided as definitive and simplifying technical answers to urban problems.

*2. The promotion of events and tools aiming at recognizing, enhancing and fostering the importance of new forms of citizenship and agency in the contemporary city has been one of the key dimension of the Strategic project.* The strategic project has shown in fact that, in order to gain efficacy and legitimation in working on a new livability for the urban region, it is necessary to mobilize and involve different actors, in so far they bring within the process not only their ideas but also the networking nature of their actions and forms of agency. In front of the growing fragmentation of decision-making arenas, the possibility to experience and foster the co-activation of new forms of citizenship, modalities of cooperation, has been regarded as a possible response, thus notwithstanding the risks and difficulties of such an option. Difficulties due, on the one side, to the fact that this asks for a new role on the part of institutions and a new ability to deal with a different approach to the production of public and to project; on the other, to the new role and approach urban actors are asked to assume towards institutions. In fact, only overcoming the artificial switch between policies and practices, innovation can be produced in the field of public policies: of course this is not a simple path to be taken. Mostly in the Milan urban region, where society shows an attitude to work by itself and whenever the encounters between institutions and society happen, project partnerships are often promoted in which institutions delegate without investing on their different responsibility, producing rather than regeneration, the perishing of the public sphere and further de-legitimation of institutions themselves. The Strategic Project seems to have highlighted the urgency and relevance of the construction of open spaces of encounters between institutions and society in relation to common problems and interests. In particular the image of the “City of city” has contributed to stress on the one side the necessity and importance of forms of horizontal cooperation between municipalities which, in lack of a metropolitan government, are producing some forms of metropolitan governance; on the other it has also highlighted that the urban region is the plural life context of a multiplicity of urban populations, not necessarily rooted locally, but which, sharing interests and practices in a situated context, produce new forms of territoriality which cannot be classified in traditional terms, since they produce, and are the product, of new forms of spatiality and temporality, distance and proximity... These new forms allude and ask for a new treatment of territoriality, sovereignty and citizenship which the urban region of Milan, as others, is currently lacking of. Several European cities are trying to cope with these problems, as well as urban research is engaged in this issue as witnessed by the proliferation of ways and definition of cities and the related discussion on citizenship (see Sassen’s notion of “assemblage” – Sassen, 2008 -, but also Cinthia Ghorra-Gobin, according to which the discussion can be simplified to two opposite points of view and principles: “1) le principe de la gouvernance qui se définit comme “l’art de gouverner sans gouvernement” en créant un consensus articulant de manière diffuse et flexible démocratie de participation et démocratie de représentation et 2) la principe de une réorganisation de l’Etat prenant en compte de manière explicite la

question d'un espace métropolitain en quête de régulation et, de ce fait, sensible à l'idée d'un Etat de déclinant à diverses échelles" ( Ghorra- Gobin, 2008, pg. 166).

3. *The production of innovation in the policy field asks for a continuous feeding of project capacities, of continuous learning forms and permanent efforts of experimentation.* Competitions promoted throughout the strategic project have shown that local society is rich of resources and ideas, often more innovative than those produced and available in institutions. Their interest to be activated is evident, despite the fatigue this produces. The persisting interest in investing in institutions by local society is on the counterpart balanced by great expectations, for institutions to be able to foster new spaces of relation and collaboration, new ideas and practices. The answer of institutions cannot (and is not) to be taken for granted: since the project has shown that, despite good intentions, institutions can be stressed by similar pressures for change and have their frame for action (habits and logics) to deal with. Institutions conceived as go-between or "in-between spaces" (Tagliagambe, 2008) (in common spaces, but also vectors of relationship) are still difficult to be built and managed. Because this requires new modalities of action and new tools, time and efforts, which are not always available or able to be produced. If on the one side the project has produced new occasions to open such kind of spaces, on the other several difficulties have presented during the process have occurred showing that this direction has to be further developed. These difficulties are experienced and addressed in several similar processes in Italian and European cities, where new ways to produce innovations in public action are researched, at the same time they still feed different positions in the field of public action (as proposed by Lascoumes et Le Galès, 2007, according to which two possible evolutions can be foreseen; on the one side "l'extension" d'une cage de verre", where public policy making has to deal with contract, arguing and negotiations, and of "un cage de ferre", where the condition for public action is the constitution of a juridical stable environment) among which the difficulties-opportunities of dealing with un "action au pluriel" (Thevenot, 2006) are still to be invented.

Actually at the end of the process, some "construction sites" have been individuated by the strategic Project in the final document *Scenari, visioni idee per l'abitabilità della regione urbana milanese*, in order to consolidate the results and work upon the three above mentioned issue, among which:

- Promoting new public initiatives of discussion on the urban region and its habitability, favoring the confrontation and discussion among interests, ideas and projects of the wider society;
- Promoting new ideas competition in the spirit of the original ones able to foster a large society involvement in the design of new urban policies;
- Promoting the construction of a **Metrocenter**, as a stable place of reflection and discussion on urban policies and challenges, inspired to main successful international experiences.

These three directions of work should collaborate in promoting a sort of legacy of the project in terms of innovation in governance culture. As a matter of fact they propose ways to give continuity to the innovations promoted by and within the process through

special events and actions and to invest further on the most relevant achievements and challenges of the project.

It is within this context that lays the reflection proposed in this paper which, starting from a specific context, tries to reflect upon the way in which new public forms of agency can be shaped in contemporary cities. **URBAN CENTERS** – this definition being related to a bunch of experiences of different nature and with different aims and roles – have been founded in the last decades in several European and north-American cities, trying to address some of the challenges and issues addressed also by the Milan urban region. This paper aims at reflecting upon their results and the conditions of possible success, looking at them not as a taken for granted solutions, but indeed as “construction sites” of governance which could try to invent local tools to deal innovatively with the challenges of contemporary cities.

## 2. CONTEXT CONDITIONS/2

### **A path already explored and the contemporary reasons for re-exploring it.**

Bruno Dente, in a recent *paper* titled “Governare l’innovazione a Milano” (Dente, 2005), dedicated to discuss the ways in which most relevant innovations are decided and implemented in Milan area, highlights two major local (as well as general) trends, strictly interrelated: on the one side the multilevel governance nature of every decision making process (excluding the possibility of hierarchic solutions and every hypothesis of traditional metropolitan government); on the other side the growing pluralization of policy subjects and the limits and pitfalls of mechanisms of negotiation and participation promoted to include them in the processes on the base of their values and professional expertise. This seems to have produced a decision making system and a policy making one where institutions are still in the center, but the system is stretched both horizontally and vertically: thus shaping what is at the same time **an under-institutionalized city and a under-governed one**, where innovative solutions to problems promoted by institutions have been a few and fallacious, while more interesting innovations have been produced bottom-up and managed in discrete solitude by non institutional actor.

This is not a new condition for Milan indeed, but its persistence, according to Dente could lead to three major consequences: a stasis in projectuality; the difficulty to recover the relationships with the center; the fall of the already scarce horizontal cooperation at metropolitan level. In particular the risk that politics could lose its capacity to innovate, acting by emergencies, isolated from society, looking for institutional solutions to dynamic problem, hard to be fixed, is central in Dente diagnosis of the situation. The reasons of this situation, according to Dente, can be read in the dismantling of the think-tanks of the seventies: the progressive lack of investments and subjects in charge for innovation would have been central in determining the current condition. In order to get out of this situation, he suggests, on the one side, to get back to invest on intermediate institutions, on the other on the promotion of feasibility studies able to promote projects fostering horizontal and vertical cooperation on the base of concrete opportunities and projects. In this sense the permanent lack of an institutional solutions able to address these conditions, could play

as an opportunity, leaving space for interesting and innovative solutions. In fact, what the Milan context shows is a great lack of innovation coming from the grass root level, in contraposition to a scarce capacity of innovation from the institutional point of view. Comparing, in a recent research project, four main Italian cities and metropolitan contexts, Turin, Milan, Naples and Florence - exploring the link between density of networks and capacity of innovation (meant in terms of innovation in solving problems of metropolitan nature, in terms of product, process, agenda) - Dente shows that Milan, differently from the others, is characterized by a strong fragmentation and role of the third sector (every form of civic association) in producing innovation, in general with a strong role of technicians and experts, and a reduced role of institutions, causing a relative retard in its diffusion and promotion.

Dente's reflections do update actually those produced more than a decade ago by Paolo Fareri (Fareri, 1995;1996), which, charged by the Chamber of Commerce of Milan, to explore the conditions of feasibility of an Urban Center for the city of Milan, described a situation, which, under several perspectives, is not really changed, though some new elements have recently appeared.

Looking at an *urban center* in terms of "a center that somehow develops activities of mobilization of actors into decision making processes dealing with urban transformations" and coming from a research project on existing experiences in the USA context, he highlighted two key issues that made difficult to promote such a "governance tool" in Milan. On the one side North American experiences could count upon a relevant role of foundations, not only in terms of funds made available, but also as non partisan actors, and upon the maturity of decision making networks, a resource rather than an obstacle in pursuing complex decisions and results, conditions not simple to be achieved in the Milan context. In particular the context in which Fareri explored these possibilities was one in which the efficacy and legitimacy of decision-making in urban planning was questioned and stressed: the urban center in this sense was explored as a possibility to overcome a system of decision making which seemed to be stuck, made unable to decide by fragmentation and contraposition of interests, and because of a scarce legitimacy, transparency and ability to treat processes on the part of public administration. Thus causing the incapacity of the city to take decisions concerning large processes of urban change. Thence the necessity to improve the efficacy of public action, and transparency, information and participation was the main problem of that period, characterized by political scandals, so relevant at the national level, that they generated the general crisis and disappearance of historical traditional parties (DC; PSI; PCI) and their substitution with new ones (LEGA; FORZA ITALIA; ULIVO). In those years actually many actors, in particular economical ones, were asking for a new capacity of action of public administration able to make the urban economy re-start on the one side, while a general plea for more transparency in decision making was the focus of public discourse on the other. This generated the convergence towards the idea of a urban center on the one hand as a space of information and on the other as a mechanism for developing a new capacity of networking between public and private actors and producing input and output legitimacy.

According to Fareri this convergence was actually producing false expectations towards and references to other experiences, unable to deal specifically with some of the

problems generating the local impasse and characterizing the context like: the incapacity of producing a strategic vision and a new identity for the city, of fostering great urban projects, of producing micro-urban spread initiatives able to co-work with large scale initiatives, the capacity of integration of actors able to produce innovative and efficacious public policies. Drawing from different expectations expressed by a series of proposals produced at that time by other local actors ( studying in the same period the feasibility of a urban center from their specific perspectives, i.e. the Architectural society, the Entrepreneurs associations), Fareri proposed two possible ways to approach the a project of Urban center for the city of Milan. One was actually based on a declination of the **SPUR model**, the San Francisco urban center, seen as an association aiming at defining shared vision towards the problems of the city and building possible solutions to them, governed by a large board made of representatives of mobilized actors, referring to local public administration as the only not represented actor in the board and thus able to influence it, acting as a representative of all the other main actors at play. This model, particularly interesting and successful in the San Francisco context, a sort of “association of associations”, seemed to Fareri impossible to be promoted in the Milan case, due to factors above mentioned: frailty of local institutions; lack of leadership and weakness of local social actors, generating relevant difficulties in terms of cooperation. The solution proposed by Fareri, in spite of SPUR model, was that of promoting a “Competition for innovation”. Fareri’s idea was based on the fact that on the one side it was almost impossible, 15 years ago, to find an institutional solution to the weakness of institutions (a paradox *per se*), able to produce a cooperative effort and that this should be created in a different way. In particular enhancing the decisional network and redistributing resources through actors, in particular social ones. Two were the possible missions Fareri focused on: on the one side the **construction of shared visions** concerning the future of the city; on the other the **promotion of innovative forms of urban policies**. Where knowledge, information and design capabilities were the focus of the action. Thence the idea to give over with an orthodox and comprehensive urban center (with a board able to be representative of the complexity and fragmentation, competition of interests and idea of the urban actors) and to proceed towards an incremental approach to innovation in urban policies. Promoting a competition whose official focus was on the production of innovation in terms of urban policies, and whose indirect one would have been that of fostering cooperation through practices and projects. This shift in the treatment of the idea is central in Fareri’s hypothesis. And it relies on three major hypothesis which are still central : (1) the necessity to cope with the problem of the start-up of positive interactions between actors should not be treated within existing organizational frameworks (as well institutional ones). While actions promoted and designed have the role to foster cooperation through practices; (2) rather than focusing on the direct production of generic visions for the city, innovation on specific relevant issues was the focus of activities, in order to achieve more efficacy in and through actions; (3) rather than working on networks’ design, launching the competition would allow to work on distribution of resources among actors, in order to enable them to act.

These hypothesis are still actual from two perspectives: a **context related perspective and a theory perspective**.

From a **context related perspective**, the situation which Milan is still facing is not so far apparently from that of the '80es, upon which Fareri's ideas were based, but for different reasons:

(a) **on the one side the issue of innovation and cooperation are still main problems at stake.** Therefore a traditional approach to the production of a *urban center* is still not easy to be adopted: it would be very difficult to promote a start-up from this perspective, because starting from the construction of the alliance and network would produce again important impasses. Cooperation is the goal to be achieved, still, rather than the premise for the constitution of a urban center. Differently from the past, indeed, what is causing this difficulty in cooperation has more to deal with a new (at least) apparent strength of institutions which seem to have gained in power and autonomy: new power to city mayors, as well as new powers to regions, seem to produce more limits to cooperation rather than new spaces for interaction. A limited interpretation of autonomy (as power *from* rather than power *to*) brings institutions to decline their powers in terms of exclusive competencies within their borders. Therefore, despite the clear evidences of problems which cannot be treated neither in autonomy by a single institution, nor by institutions without the interaction with social actors. With respect to the past, in other words, the Milan context evidences a trend which is generally Italian but also European, which sees on the one side more powerful local public actors, which are indeed still not able to accept the challenges produced by the characteristics of contemporary urban question. What is still missing in this move towards decentralization is the production of spaces of intermediation, in-between spaces in which one could recognize and interact with the others; while indeed spaces for actions risk to be limited rather than widened by public administration and local administration reforms. This is producing for example hypothesis of metropolitan governance scarcely able to address local problems. A recent law has been approved shaping once again the metropolitan city, within a common framework unable to deal with local contexts and differences. On this point I will come back also from the theory perspective.

(b) **on the other side, local society resources have changed and matured**, producing new public demands. As the Progetto Strategico has shown, but also as Dente showed in his research, there is a wider active civic society which is producing innovation and is able to foster new ideas and projects. Public-private foundations role for example is getting wider, many civic associations are becoming important urban actors. Still they are suffering from two points of view. On the one side they are expecting from institutions support and collaboration, while institutions seem to be late in understanding possible paths toward different approaches to the production of public. While civil society produces innovative demands, institutions are still trapped into traditional ways of treatment of reduction of problems and solutions, in general of policies and public action. Reinforcing networks is only recently entered in their agenda as main aim, and still institutional activities reinforcing civic society resources is limited to funding, while other kind of resources are being asked. On the other side, two seem to be the core issues for local actors, and they both belong to the sphere of resources for action related to knowledge. Knowledge in terms of institutional, steering, process knowledge: local actors need to understand and interact with processes from this first point of view, in order to act, to make decisions, to be effective. In this sense they ask both for strategic frameworks (which select relevant issues in the public agenda) and

clear policies (which define fields of action, but also relevant actor to work with), but also for interpretative frameworks (which help them in making decision, understanding processes). Civil society needs ways which can at the same time reduce its fatigue in producing public and treating uncertainty in their everyday actions; at the same time there is a growing need to integrate their role and resources in public action, but modalities are still quite primitive.

Therefore, the proposal of Paolo Fareri is still an updated one, though the context has much changed indeed. The city has in fact largely overcome the problems of the '80s. Many wide urban projects have been launched, implemented, come to an end. Though actually producing nor a better city, often, neither more interestingly integrated networks of actors. As a recently edited book comments, Milan is still an “uncompleted city” (2008).

From a **theory perspective** there are at least two main issues, among others, upon which we could focus upon in order to sketch a frame for reflection. One is based on the necessity to rethink the concept of “actor”, the second with the notion of “local”. These two issues will be discussed in the following paragraph and are, in my perspective, central to argue about urban centers as governance and policy tools in urban regions.

### **3. Urban center/Metro center. Looking for new governance tools in urban regions.**

Several urban centers have been promoted in Italy in the last decade for a different set of reasons and aims, as well as all over Europe and north America. In Italy a network was instituted some years ago among them, while some comparative studies have been promoted in order to understand the nature, efficacy and effectiveness of these experiences. Outside Italy we can find as well some interesting reflections on the nature and role of these urban experimentations.

A recent comparative study was presented by Gabriel Metcalf, director at SPUR, the San Francisco urban center, in the Newsletter/calendar Issue 460, 2007. Metcalf proposes in his article a synthesis of a study awarded to SPUR by Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundations, which allowed SPUR to produce a research report dedicated to assess the results and aims of several different experiences of urban center throughout USA. The report provides some interesting spurs, among others, to our reflection:

- (1) The first has to deal with the **fields of action of urban center**: three are the spheres of action inside which urban center position themselves. *Policy research, advocacy planning and education*; while the first two are the more practiced, education activities are produced only by a limited number of urban centers.
- (2) This can be linked to a second important point: according to Metcalf there are “**different models** at play for how an organization comes to its policy positions and the extent of influence it has in its respective city or region”. The first has to deal with its capacity to be perceived and organized as an open space of emergence of different interests, the second to the capacity to produce research and knowledge (evidence-based research organization); the third with the capacity to produce “a substantive vision”, in Metcalf words “an organization

that promotes a set of values”. What Metcalf’s typologies suggest is that, in different ways, urban centers deal with the production of a third space in between different actors and interests, able to promote a discussion on values, therefore not a neutral space but a strategic one, where issues are selected and where the production of knowledge is central.

- (3) There are two main fields of action and interest in the USA experience of urban center: the planning field and the governance field. Urban centers in fact seem to be essentially devoted to **two main clusters** (“good government focus” and “good-planning focus”). In general what Metcalf highlights in his conclusions, is that while for those working essentially in the field of planning, there seems to be a sort of consensus on common shared values, those working more on the government-governance issues seem to be less consensual: some are more addicted to efficiency, some to democracy.
- (4) Differences between urban centers, according to Metcalf, partly deal with the nature of the members supporting them. Many of them in fact have a large social membership and this produces a large variety of interests and field of action, also with some risks (that of not being able to select and focus upon core tasks and visions), others have a clear issue at stake defined by the specific actors’ network promoting it. Finally among the results of the SPUR research project is that urban centers have mainly a **urban focus**, only a few of them working on a metropolitan dimension (in some cities two different organizations deal with the different urban scales).

A similar report edited in 2007 by the network of urban center proposes some considerations on the Italian experiences<sup>2</sup>:

- (1) on the one side they are quite **different among each other**, but most of them are essentially a **product of the action of local institutions**, only in some cases open to a larger public participation in terms of membership.
- (2) At the same time, their core aim is that of opening to the local society, promoting activities which position into a wider range of activities, from information to public communication. This witnesses of a specific Italian condition in which urban centers are essentially **institutionally designed and settled and as such have some difficulties in providing a third actor** as in other successful international cases. This causes also their “short-term” stories, since they are essentially attached to local politics’ time.
- (3) What emerge from the report is that within this framework, Italian urban centers suffer from many points of view. On the one side while the production of knowledge and information is central too as in the USA cases, their institutional nature ends with **pushing information activities over knowledge production**: communication is a central task for institutions, and already a large effort. Therefore urban centers are, at the end of the day, producing visibility and communication, not necessarily transparency and new knowledge. Their

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<sup>2</sup> **What we talk about when we talk about urban center?** *Di cosa parliamo quando parliamo di urban center?* SEMINARIO Urban Center Network comunicazione, risorse, cittadini, progetti. **Gli urban center verso il futuro delle città.** *Primi esiti del seminario Urban Center Network progetti, cittadini, comunicazione, risorse (Torino, 21-22 giugno 2007)* Elena Carmagnani Urban Center Metropolitan di Torino, Torino, Venezia, Trento, Bolzano, Genova, Bologna, Ravenna, Roma Municipio XI, Napoli, Lamezia Terme, Palermo, Catania; sono state contattate e coinvolte anche le città di: Milano, Asti, Verona, Padova, Firenze, Pesaro

protagonists accuse the mono-directionality of communication. At the same time also those who have more space to produce knowledge about the city, see the limits of their actions, in particular in proposing interpretations and discussions of the urban able to deal with the multi-temporal nature of urban change (suspended in between exposition on the past, the present or the future, or workshops on alternative scenarios) and the multiple geographies of change and discussion of it (the necessity to elaborate new forms of interpretation but also new multi-local forms of exploration and discussion on change).

- (4) In this sense what the discussion on Italian urban centers make clear is that they provide quite **restricted spaces in terms of innovation of urban exploration**, at the same time, as such, they are already a sort of difficult conquest. From the point of view of their capacity to produce effective results, being attached to local administrations, often with limited resources, they have a restricted scope and limited outcomes. There is a general plea for a wider open nature but at the same time actors show their worries about the independence from private actors' pressure and interests. From this point of view, just some of them are able to produce processes of participation and to foster an enlargement of the public arena; the objective of empowerment is essentially typical of conditions of work in deeply deprived cities. Finally the Italian case is characterized by a discussion on the mission of urban center in terms of role towards large urban projects: accompanying, judging...are among the possible displayed roles. The all of them seem still to be contested and the fact that most urban centers are product of local administration is a relevant part of polemics.

If we compare some of the issues contained in the two reports we can isolate a set of research issues which are relevant to discuss about limits and challenges which urban center are facing in contemporary urban world and their capacity to be experimentations able to deal with the challenges of a new urban question. As a matter of fact in fact my thesis is that they face some different problems, which are essentially related to the necessity to deal with on the one side a discussion on the notion of action, on the other on the notion of "local" (which are both contained in the diffuse reference to the notion of "LOCAL ACTOR", which has been central both in the Italian policy analysis, and in a wider academic discussion and policy design approach, the one that is still in the background of many Italian urban center experiences). Referring to this notion can be problematic in trying to imagine a urban center able to overcome some of the issues as far as now evidenced. In fact on the one side urban centers seem yet not at ease in producing or giving space to a new governance culture, while they seem to be more successful in creating situated coalitions of actors on specific issues: when they are a simple product of the traditional public action they seem to have a limited result, while their activities are more interesting when they are generated as open laboratories on public action. Of course they must be local; they are in fact generated in a specific environment but the way in which the context is taken in count seems quite traditional in most cases.

#### *Local And Action: deconstructing the notions*

The notion of LOCAL has been central in recent policy analysis literature. So much that,

as for Macyntire “every culture has its own specific characters”<sup>3</sup>, we could argue that the local actor has been one of the main “characters” of policy analysis and also of public policy design both in recent Italian literature and practices. Several Italian classical texts have focused on this concept: in particular Alberto Magnaghi’s book “il Progetto Locale” (Magnaghi, 2000), synthesizes the position of this and several other authors in the last decades, according to which, in order to build constructive relationships between local society and the context able to valorize territorial patrimony, *local society* is essential. The problem is at the end of the day “*fare società locale*” (to produce, to have local society) one sufficiently articulated and complex to take care of its environment and territory. In other words in Magnaghi’s perspective the construction of *local society* is proposed as a project to be achieved on the base of a work aiming at empowering a set of actors interested in promoting a project, through a constructive dialogue among local long-term socio-cultural models. At the end of the day, in Magnaghi’s view, the “local” is a response to both globalization and to hierarchical and top-down approaches to public action, since it is seen as the only one able to produce sociality (only the local with its short networks can produce sociality) and projects. Of course this definition of the local is problematic, as Bagnasco stated in a coeval book title “Tracce di comunità” (Bagnasco, 1999): local societies in fact are not easy to be isolated (they do not exist without relationships with a larger context), though at the same time they still remain as a point of significative and autonomous structuring of society. According to Bagnasco in fact, on the one hand, we can no more identify walls able to define in univocal ways physical as well as social borders of a city, since cities and territories are open relational structures. At the same time, on the other hand, says Bagnasco, local societies can be identified as a momentaneous stabilizations: but this has to do with taking a picture of a flux.

A picture that, with Crosta (2003), sounds like rather as a response to the need of sociological studies as well as of public policies to treat society: which both need to fix and treat in terms of social demand the social. In the literature dedicated to LOCAL in fact, which is often embedded in community studies, we assist to the production of a circular and virtuous relationship within the univocal belonging to a territory, the competence on (local) problems based on local knowledge and the issue of citizenship and participation (where local societies are more legitimated of any other actor in making decisions because of their univocal belonging and their specific knowledge of places and situations). *Aggregation, integration and identity* (Crosta, 2003) are thus composing the reference to a notion of local which crystallizes what it would like to understand and explore and animate. But this virtuous circle cannot actually be taken for granted, as Doreen Massey (1994) argues in her writings: we are in a condition of “persistent identification of place with community. Yet this is misidentification. On the one hand, communities can exist without being in the same place (from networks of friends with lie interest, to major religious, ethnic or political communities). On the other, the instances of places housing single communities in the sense of coherent social groups are probably – and I would argue, have for long been- quite rare” (Massey, “A global sense of place”, in *Space-place and gender*, 1994). In Massey’s perspective we should look on the contrary at places as “points of intersection”, “articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings” and develop “an extroverted sense of place”, in relation to

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Barbara Czarniawska in the chapter of her book *Narrating the organization* (1997) and dedicated to “Dramas and Autobiographies”.

the fact that on the one side places are “processes”, they do not necessarily define through boundaries, but “because of”, or “by way of”, relationships and linkages, on the other because of the multiple identities they have and are made of. Three conditions not far from those defined also by Thrift when he proposes to reflect critically upon “politics of propinquity” (“politics of local community too often assumes that propinquity is a value in itself and automatically grants power, at the expenses of local engagement in a wider political arena”); “politics of place” (“to say the decision must take into consideration all local parties is now pretty much accepted, but this decision is still far from taking stock of the so many distant others implicated in the issue at stake: who are the interested partners, and how can their interest be represented?”); “citizenship” (“where the urban is pluralized and distributed, and there are many spatial affiliations”). These positions lead to avoid reifying the local (since it cannot be defined in itself, it is not an object, Sfez, 1977), both in terms of policy design and policy making (see the critic of Rosanvallon (2008) to the notion of “*démocratie de proximité*” in relation to the French approach in institutional reforms). As a matter of fact in thinking the local we must be aware that, with Latour (2005), “the local has to be redistributed”: we have to face the multi-local, multi-temporal, multi-meaning nature of the local, where relations which produce the local are multiple and different, with different power and pressures. Reducing proximity to a simple variable of scale, in fact, according to Latour, obscures rather than enlightening the challenges that the reference to local can open to: whereas we have to acknowledge the fact that no interaction (the focus of Latour interest) is isotopic, nor synchronic, nor synoptic; interactions are not homogeneous and not isobaric, but they are rather overflowing in every direction. In other words, “no place dominates enough to be global and no place is self-contained enough to be local”.

Adopting this critical and deconstructive approach to the notion of local to which **notion of actor** we can refer to? And who are local actors a urban policy-maker or a local politician should refer to when considering new governance approaches able to treat the complexity of challenges urban region bring about? How can/do local actors be identified and activated?

One interesting support in trying to face this question comes from Cefai’s work. Looking at policies as social and political constructs and focusing on the dynamics of construction of a (public) problem within the interaction of actors trying to impose their vision and interpretation, he has focused on the notion of *public arena*, defined as “l’ensemble des interactions qui s’efforcent d’interpréter et de stabiliser un enjeu”, “cadre de pertinence”, which is not pre-existing but constitute (and re-constitute) in action. In this sense policy networks analysis, he suggests, must be very careful in distinguishing between mapping of actors and actors’ interactions provided inside an institutionalized definition of the policy and a wider definition of (policy) arena, meant as the space of interactions striving to interpret and stabilize an issue (Cefai, 1996). In other words, in distinguishing between a reduction of society to social demand and in a open exploration of the issue of agency. According to Cefai in fact recent past approaches have shown clear limits. The *Resource Mobilization Theory* has tried to explain collective action in terms of “mobilisation of resources” on the base of a given problem definition, thus focusing on (collective) action in terms of efficacy of resources mobilised. The *Political Process Model* instead has analysed the “structure of opportunities”, refusing to take objectives for granted as well as spaces of actions, focusing rather on the occasions which “switch

on” action and mobilitation. Both approaches for Cefai are just partially useful because they do not touch the political issue of the constitution in public, and in particular of the construction of meaning. In this direction Cefai grants *Frame Analysis* (Snow e Benford) some new achievements but still unsatisfactory, in so far on the one side the actors’ status is still taken for granted, on the other political arenas are defined and observed as simple fields of action and strategic interaction. Finally neither the *Deliberative Democracy Approach* would succeed in overcoming this limit, in so far public arenas cannot be consider with Habermas, simple forms of rational public discussion. Cefai thus proposes to start from what he calls the “*politique du proche*”- the association around a local problem characterized by a continuous tension between belonging, affiliation, proximity alliances, personal preoccupation and local radication, general interest, common good and public utility. He suggests to focus on three key issues:

- (1) the situatedness in times and spaces of agency, where its processual character implies that actors, resources, strategies are not fixed nor stable, since identities, interests and agency are multiple, co-existent and changing;
- (2) the fact that mobilitation of actors is linked to a very differentiated and intertwined nature of issue at stakes, varying from personal values to general interest. These typologies, based on a great variety of forms and grammars of justification, compose one another. This moving composition makes processes not generalizable, both in terms of inputs and outputs, processes of association.
- (3) Hence (3) *the continuous movement from one field to another, the translation implied, becomes the topic to be explored*. Since the movement towards action is in the perception of the problem as well as in the construction of the reasons for action (*motifs d’action*) which are for Cefai *comptes-rendus* (accounts), which offer reasons and vocabularies and grammars for action ( with Mills, “Situated actions and vocabularies of motivation” and Trom “Grammaire de la mobilisation et vocabulaire de motifs” ).

This means, finally, that public arenas are not to given, pre-defined forms and institutional disposals or material elements: but rather that they are developing from *situations d’épreuve*: in a pragmatic social perspective public arena is a «enchevêtrement de dispositifs teatraux, ou des acteurs a compétences distinctes jouent des performances destinées a des publics distincts, même si plus o moins concourants. Elle se décompose en une constellation de scènes qui empiètent les unes sur le autres, qui ouvrent sur de coulisses a géométries variables, ou le degrés de publicité sont détermines par le cadrages des acteurs et dont les auditoires changent au grade de performances. Une arène publique n’est pas un espace public centré, isotrope e homogène: elle se déploie, nous l’avons dit, autour de situation d’épreuve (..) une arène publique se déploie en prenant ses appuis et en lançant des passerelles entre différentes scènes publiques».

In this sense, Cefai concludes that models of mobilitation of material resources and political structure of opportunities, of organization of collective action or strategic interaction frames, reveal to be limited paths of thinking the political problem of public engagement, of publicisation of problems, constitution of public goods and configuration of public arenas. In a Dewey perspective, Cefai, prefers to found on democracy as public inquiry, where the focus on discursive situation could be more appropriately centered on a “ethnography of ordinary conversations and public

discourses”.

If we apply this reasoning to the notion of actor and local actor in particular we have to acknowledge that it becomes on the one side quite difficult a task to pre-define a map of the local actors on the other the local dimension of agency is a social, political construction, which is one of the main challenges to deal with in contemporary urban condition. In this sense the suggestion of Barbara Czarniawska in her article (On time, space and action nets, in *Organization* 2004, n°11, pg.773) is a relevant one, when she tries to refer to the notion of *action's network*, rather than *actors' network*. Referring thus to the action as producer of actors (and networks), rather to the role of actors in producing networks and actions.

In this sense the notion of local actor is a research question to be reformulated in order to be treated, both in research and practices. Urban centers should offer open pathways to experimentation.

#### *How to work at a urban center in a metropolitan context*

Drawing from these reflections, how can a urban center for a urban region like that of Milan be thought? What in fact can be the nature, role and characteristics of a urban center able to provide spaces to reflect upon these challenges? How can a urban center project try to deal with the questions provided by dealing with a “regional city” like that of Milan? What in fact urban regions, or regional cities as in Frug and Barron’s definition (Frug and Barron, 2008), or again in Megacity regions, in Peter Hall’s one, make clear more than other contexts, is that on the one side the notion of local is more and more difficult to be fixed and, on the other, public action is particularly stressed also because of this. What is more evidently at stake is the relationship between territoriality-sovereignty and authority, which lays behind the traditional models of local public action. In Frug’s perspective, as in other scholars of institutions, an institutional solution could be found in promoting a regional legislature, able to deal with the redefinition of the link between territoriality-sovereignty-authority (the Frug paradox describes for example the idea that in a metropolitan context, citizens could have the possibility to vote in different municipalities which for different reasons are relevant for their lives). But if we put aside the institutional solution (which is rather difficult to be achieved, also because states seem to be not at ease with a differentiated treatment of urban regions; in this sense the new Dutch planning act and the German law allowing a differentiated organization of metropolitan region- elected or not- seem to be exceptions rather than shared solutions, problematic fields of experimentation, rather than best practices). In this sense urban centers could in some cases provide some space to discuss upon and experience what a city is today and which are the challenges in planning, governing, policy making for a urban region. The nature, form, organization of this space can take different ways and declinations, so much that maybe we could classify under the name of *urban centers* experiences different from those officially labeled with the name: if we take what is happening in the Paris case, where a urban center is acting under the name of Pavillon de l’Arsenale, what we could rather define as a *urban center* is the large laboratory made of both the Conference metropolitaine institution, the production of several important projects of cooperation between Paris and the surrounding municipalities, rather than the Grand Pari(s) de l’Agglomeration Parisienne, promoted by the president Sarkozy. The

whole of these experiences is producing a large debate on the city and its future. The Pavillon de l'Arseale is contributing with research and information, but is not in this perspective the more interesting space.

In this perspective three key axes seem relevant in the Milan case, as well as in similar ones.

If one of the main problems of contemporary urban region is cooperation, in order to deal with fragmentation of powers and actors, and the production of shared visions in face of different identities and interests, urban centers **should not feed and be fed by an organizational and institutional approach to the problem**. Attacking the problem of urban governance reproducing on the one side the logic of government, on the other introducing the issues of deliberative democracy from the very beginning, can in fact be useless. In the Milan case promoting a urban center on the base of the constitution of a board able to represent the whole society would produce a failure from the very beginning. But this is a general problem. No matter whatever a level of social cohesion and integration of actors a city can count on, the challenges of taking in count the urban as a field of interaction is however an un-accomplished and exigent one. What is interesting in promoting a urban center is to experience it as a “third” space able to promote a wide open urban discussion and experimentation. In this sense urban centers should not reproduce an approach to urban actors which consider them as taken for granted, but should rather try to reflect the nature of social and political construction of production of actoriality/agency.

**Questioning and producing action thus could be the focus of urban centers.** Fostering actions which could be able to produce innovative actions arena and actors, rather than producing theoretical reflection about models of action. In other words to produce shared fields of interaction and interest, which would open space for the constitutions of situated agency. At the same time putting action at the centre of attention, could produce an agenda. Agenda which would result from an act of selecting issues upon the momentaneous (and partisan) convergence of interests and practices, ideas and projects. Promoting a urban center thus could force towards the selection of themes, challenges, scenarios and visions. In the Milan case, that of *habitability*, promoted by the Strategic project, could be one stimulating theme. Following the results of the competitions, livability could be the focus of a urban center, in a condition in which the quality of life seems to be decreasing and at the same time seems to be particularly relevant in citizens' perceptions. Starting from this focus, a urban center could try to reflect upon the way in which this habitability could be produced in innovative ways. In other words how public goods and common goods can be created in contemporary urban regions, counting on a new dialogue between institutional actors and non institutional ones.

Finally a urban center, in a metropolitan region, should try **to question the issue of locality**. Urban regions are, more than others, in fact not only “incomplete” local societies, as far as they clearly demonstrate the un-appropriateness of a traditional notion of urban government, declination of citizenship, conceptualization of local. But they are incomplete in so far we still miss stable conclusions of a reflection upon the way in which “redistributing the local”, in Latour's worlds, can be addressed in all its challenges, rather

than in its limitations and obstacles. This has to deal with different aspects: on the one side, for example, it could imply the production of new forms of interpretation of the urban, which can be relevant not only in research terms, but also to build a new understanding of the city and sense-making about the urban phenomenon today. On the other it could help producing new spaces for action and interaction, new forms of urban agency.

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