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Politics and the valorisation of cultural and environmental goods in a
Mediterranean city: the case of Catania.

Abstract: The renewal of urban areas is becoming more and more frequent in planning policy strategies.

As far as Mediterranean cities are concerned, the conservation of centres of historic importance is motivated not so much by economic interest as by the need to recover the values of the past, in order to preserve and pass them on to future generations. In this process of renovation and recuperation, the synergistic role of the public authorities and the private sector is becoming increasingly important, not only on a local level but also internationally.

The European Union intervenes with its specific programmes such as the URBAN Initiative, which is more directly aimed at helping urban areas at a disadvantage and improving the standard of living of their inhabitants. This is what is happening in Catania, where public intervention in the Old Town and in a coastal area will receive new impulse from structural Funds from the Plurifunded Operative Programmes and from the URBAN Initiative.

To these initiatives are added other instruments of planning such as the Patti Territoriali (Territorial Pacts) and PRUSST which interacting together with the support of the partnerariat constitute an important local approach to “strategic planning”. With this term we mean the planning activity in line with the theories of sustainable development, which makes it possible to reconcile the safeguarding and valorisation of the environment with the promotion and support of economic activities, without allowing these transformations to destroy the identity of the area.

This not only implies the ability to restore 'poor' buildings on a physical-social level, but will also lead to a reappraisal of the environment, and the ability to renew and recover the functional use of certain building complexes or natural sites of historic and environmental value.

1. Urban policies in Catania.

Catania too, like many other cities, has set herself a very specific objective, that is to become a "liveable" city, by means of policies of recovery and revitalisation of the urban spaces, by a boosting of the economic functions and those of the services and the protection of the environment. The ways to reach these objectives and to solve the problems connected with them have been at the centre of political and cultural debate over the last few years; the Catania of the new millennium is going through a period of major plans, new town-planning scenarios, and new social, economic and functional scenarios too. In the history of the city there has never been such a fertile period for planning, with a climate of such political, cultural and economic optimism.

The re-qualifying process has already begun, thanks to the local policies operating in a number of directions, with the aim of giving the city a new physiognomy and a more important role in the field of competition in a wider context than the local one. These changes are in the hands of the public Authorities, who are making use of new instruments such as the Piano Regolatore (City Planning Scheme), the Territorial Pact and the funds of the European Community initiative Urban; but some merit must be afforded also to the co-operation of the private sector; operators who, integrating their interventions in a synergetic way, are working towards the common target of recovery and renewal.

The plan for renewal is directed not so much towards the restoration of buildings as to the social recovery of less developed areas; not only an urbanistic and environmental recovery therefore, but also a socio-economic one, in the prospect of a sustainable city. A number of different sectors are involved in this process of growth, all operating however with a single objective: urban re-qualification. The aim is not so much to redefine the

shape of the city and improve living conditions within it, as to create major opportunities to realise urban development projects capable of restoring quality, identity and new economic possibilities to the city. This can be done through interventions in favour of green areas and environmental quality, the rediscovery of the historic and architectonic heritage, the re-organisation of mobility (new ways of getting around the city), the definition of new urban focal points, a new relationship of the city with the sea and the coastline. It is an ambitious project, which aims to make Catania one of the capital cities of the Mediterranean, bridging the gap that exists at present between reality and liveability, investing in tourism, culture, research and technology, as well as in the preservation of the old traditions of craftsmanship. The idea of a city with a breath of Europe which, looking beyond its urban limits, is able to involve in its process of development an enormous area of the coast, including the Ionic coastal strip with Taormina, the great industrial poles of Syracuse and Gela, the archaeological heritage of Syracuse and the historic town centre of Ragusa. A project which aims at rebirth, not expansion, based on the recovery and restoration of what already exists and on synergies and alliances which are essential in competition, on the different territorial levels. Tomorrow's Catania has got to choose whether to continue to plan on the basis of quantity or to invest in quality: a quality that is not only aesthetic but also functional, oriented towards the search for an identity and its valorisation (Catania City Council 1996).

2. A great plan for the city.

The position of Catania is without doubt of the most unusual kind: the city, lying next to the plain, it is the point where the sea meets the mountain; dominated by the shadow of Mount Etna it looks out over the sea with a lava-rock coast to the north, a wide sandy beach, known as "la Playa", to the south (Ruocco 1976). From the Etna Nature Park to the Simeto Nature Reserve the territory, in spite of the spread of cement, is still rich in natural resources. It is an anthropised territory whose history, contours, culture and

baroque architecture constitute a combination of particular value and a resource worth promoting.

The plan for Catania 2000 has as its objective the “re-invention” of the city, three hundred years after its rebuilding, with a project based on the existing urban structure, but to be qualified with two separate strategies: one of a global nature, regarding the re-organisation of the system of infrastructures, the recovery of the architectonic heritage of the Old Town and the restoration to new functions of the many abandoned eighteenth-century building complexes; the other of a widespread nature, based on the re-ordering of all the many peripheral districts, qualifying them with better services and more green areas in order to create a ”city of cities”, not in conflict with the Old Town but as a complement to it (Busacca 1990; Dato 1990; Catania City Council 1995). Bearing in mind that “the centre and the outskirts of a city work together absolutely as a single unit ” (Racine 1988), the urban network must be redesigned, with particular attention to the morphology of the places and the improvement of the town planning standards, for a “return to Catania”.

In the new plan, characterised by a strong emphasis on the landscape and the environment and based on both aesthetic and functional criteria, the theory of recovery substitutes the previous logic of new buildings, of valorisation that of dereliction, re-of utilisation that of abandonment; all this in the awareness that if we want to create a new image for the city and to give a boost to recreational and cultural activities it is necessary for Catania to become a city that is both beautiful and liveable (Catania City Council 1996).

From this philosophy springs the need to oppose the existing model built on a central pole with a new conception of the territory, in which the differences among the places, the inhabitants, the various situations, are respected and valorised. This leads to the new polycentric model which has recently become widespread in other European cities and which tends to give rise to synergies among local resources. (Dematteis 1988; Lanzani 1991, Finocchiaro 1999). On the basis of these guidelines, city politics are no longer based on the idea of exploiting the city based on the division in zones of the functions and on traditional models of utilisation of the

territory; the new objectives are the recovery of the city in its entirety, from the Old Town to the various outlying districts, the re-utilisation of abandoned areas, the functional autonomy of the municipalities and the subsequent reduction of commuting, the increase and improvement of public transport services, the realisation of a compact city. By giving shape to the city, in fact, it is possible to recover a basic unity and a new form of balance among subjects, places and moments in life (Trono 1996).

The recovery, which involves the whole city and takes into consideration the ten municipalities (including several districts), has as its object the realisation of a project for a "city of cities" by means of new strategies of requalification, aiming to recreate the significance of each place; to valorise each municipality on the basis of its specific characteristics and location. "City-centres" would therefore be built, one for each municipality, by means of the distribution of public services, squares, places of attraction, meeting places, to establish some points of reference not far from home and to give back the sense of identity to the old districts. The city centre, while maintaining its role as a central focus, could gradually give up some of its administrative functions and rare services, to take upon itself others, of a prevalently cultural and residential nature (Cervellati 1995).

This plan is also an attempt to reduce congestion in the town centre, caused by its role as capital of a fast-growing metropolitan area, through the decentralisation towards the outskirts of a number of functions. The territory involved includes the entire metropolitan area of Catania, so that planning decisions may be harmonised, both for the localisation of infrastructures and for a more efficacious co-ordination of services. Catania, in fact, needs not only to be re-organised within the city centre, but, going beyond the city limits, to involve also the neighbouring areas which have been caught up in the process of urbanisation, so that these can be enabled to reach a form of functional autonomy and a specific capacity for organisation and attraction, reducing the vast number of daily commuters and becoming cities in their own right (Regional Government of the Province of Catania, 1998).

This is the sort of common scenario in which the various operators should be working, without coming into conflict with one another and without excluding one another's chances in a continuous exchange, always bearing in mind that local development needs flexible plans, which can be adapted to meet any new objectives for the transformation of the territory (Finocchiaro 1999).

3. The URBAN Program and social policies.

The URBAN program is part of the European Community Initiatives Project (ECIP), which includes a number of measures directed towards degraded urban areas and the realisation of pilot projects, aimed at promoting new economic activities and new solutions, for the improvement of social conditions and the standard of living. It is an integrated program which requires the collaboration of a number of operators, institutional, private and voluntary; it is not a town-planning strategy but prevalently a socio-economic one, which thanks to a synergy of policies and instruments for urban requalification, not only material and structural but also social, operates in favour of those who suffer most from the situation of degradation and isolation: children, the unemployed, adolescents, the elderly, immigrants.

The plan for the city of Catania includes the recovery of a socio-cultural nature of a number of areas within the Old Town which are particularly run-down (The Cappuccini-Old Corso district, the Civita-Angeli Custodi district, the San Cristoforo area)¹, The interventions planned include support for all forms of craftsmanship; the re-utilisation of several buildings; improved opportunities for formation and technological innovation, in synergy with the University of Catania; a number of projects for the social and cultural integration of immigrants; the recovery and exploitation of the architectonic treasures, of green areas and the structures for recreation, sport and tourism; the creation of social and educational centres for minors; the

¹ In the area due for intervention, considerably degraded both from the point of view of the buildings and from the social one, a population of about 50.000 inhabitants live and work, little more than 15% of the entire population of the city;

improvement of public transport with the addition of eco-buses. A whole variety of projects which, when realised, could succeed in giving a face-lift to those areas which are at the very bottom of the "liveability" list: this can be seen from the poor living conditions, the presence of a large number of immigrants, the widespread petty criminality, the high figures for school drop-outs and juvenile delinquency.

To reinforce the task of urban renewal and slum clearance the City Council has put into effect an Integrated Intervention Program, aiming to re-qualify the urbanistic, architectonic and environmental fabric of the Southern San Cristoforo area. This program, which is synergistically integrated with the URBAN project, will be partially funded with resources from the Sicilian Regional Government and has as its specific aim the global re-qualification of the entire area by means of the establishment of localised public offices (residential urban functions) and services, organically integrated so as to achieve a substantial improvement in the standard of living and to re-establish the "city effect" (SDA Bocconi 1998).

4.The Southern area and the Territorial Pact.

The territory which extends outwards from the Southern edge of the Old Town, an enormous area lying between the port, the airport and the river Simeto, appears as a network of sandy beaches, natural oases, citrus fruit groves, woods and marshlands, interwoven with factories, bathing lidos, transport infrastructures, houses built without planning permission, rubbish dumps. A mixture of parts, some still untouched, others in need of an intervention of environmental recovery; a potentially precious area which, if valorised, could become the scene of important activities and functions connected with free time, recreation, tourism and hotel accommodation, and, therefore, another meeting-place and a point of reference for the whole city.

The area is the object of wide-ranged and detailed planning on the part of the "South Catania Territorial Pact for Employment", one of the many projects of local development approved by the European Community within the context of the pilot project "Territorial pacts for Employment", whose

driving force is based on the concept of “urban quality”, not only in the territorial sense of town-planning but also in that of services for the quality of life. The objective of the project is to create a sort of “green doorway” into the city from the Southern direction, re-qualifying an area in which the sea, the beach known as "La Playa" with its pinewoods and the Simeto Nature Reserve can co-exist and become resources for economic development. The programming and planning of the “South Catania” P.T.O. have paid specific attention to all the possibilities and resources of the city which can favour the realisation of development policies. In general, it has been pointed out that Catania has at her disposal a wealth of environmental and cultural resources of great importance, and a large population to enjoy it (about 700.000 inhabitants in the Metropolitan Area alone), infrastructures like the port and the airport, a long-standing tradition in trade and business, as well as the University and excellent centres of applied research; these are all elements contributing to improve the milieu of the city which must be suitably valorised within the context of local development policies.

The principal projects concern the Sea Park which aims to exploit the beach better and completely re-organise the spaces along the South coast; the creation of new structures for sport and leisure (swimming-pools, tennis and beach volley courts), hotels and tourist villages; the closure to traffic and the redesigning of a number of roads; the realisation of a port for tourists; the recovery of the waterfront, of the empty and abandoned sites; the restoration of the green areas, both as farmland and as woodland; the reclamation of the Simeto Nature Reserve by means of the demolition of all the houses built without planning permission. Through the activities planned by the Pact a new organization of the territory should be reached; the entire coastline should be re-qualified according to the most up-to-date planning guidelines, thanks to the introduction of new functions (Vallega 1992; Soriani 1998; De Vito 1999), but without the destruction of the existing environmental values. This will certainly not be easy to accomplish, since the development which is being attempted along the shoreline and the improvement of the port and airport structures run the risk together of overloading the area and could lead to overcrowding, especially during the summer months. It will therefore be necessary to reduce the seasonal

component of tourism, investing in the multiple and varied resources, both environmental and cultural, which may be enjoyed throughout the year, so as to guarantee, among other things, the stability of investments in structures for the hotel business.

5. Promotion and Development.

The projects and the interventions already under way or completed should be able to achieve a considerable impact on local development. The “environmental qualities”, once regenerated, can and must constitute again a real opportunity for competitiveness. It will be necessary to consider the territory as a "mega-business", in which an efficient collaboration between the various local authorities, institutions, firms and private citizens, join together to combine economic development and improvement in quality in the best possible way. The city as a “product” must become well-known, so it becomes necessary to talk about it, to publicise it, to communicate the opportunities it has to offer; new marketing capacities are therefore required to sell the image of the city in a positive light: what Catania and her territory are, and what they may become, (Ave and Corsico 1994).

The “Territorial Marketing Plan” is based on three main axes: high technology, the agroindustrial sector and tourism.

The first sector on which the development plan is based, whose slogan is the expression “Etna Valley”, takes into consideration the microelectronics industry and the sectors linked to telematics and computer sciences. The aim is to operate on the processes of aggregation among the major firms, such as ST and Nokia, and the allied industries. The idea is to create an industrial area, on the lines of the Californian model of “Silicon Valley”, where high-technology industries are integrated in the territory, supported by material and immaterial infrastructures for research and formation and by a University of prestige, while local firms and the advanced tertiary sector offer their services. Today the new Hi-tech firms in Catania already guarantee the direct employment of about 3000 people, and the indirect employment of over 2500 more. Investments, know-how, but above all a modern entrepreneurial culture, could therefore easily catalyse that process

of development and dissemination of entrepreneurship in the territory so as to bring about a new economic miracle (Russo 1997).

The agroindustrial sector constitutes a second area for investment: the aim is to create a large centre for services, capable of supervising and coordinating all the distribution activities of the products of market gardening, fish, flowers and meat. The new structure, articulated among other things with a commodity exchange and a laboratory for analyses and certification of quality, run by the University of Catania, could make it possible to recover the market shares lost over recent years through the deep crisis into which local agriculture has sunk.

Today, the economy of Catania counts more and more on tourism, but there are still a number of problems to be solved, such as the lack of hotels, which need to be improved in terms of both quantity and quality; also the structures and infrastructures of the sector need to be boosted. The port, which has recently begun to modernise its activities, needs a number of interventions, above all to cater for small craft tourists and cruise passengers; the needs of the airport are even more pressing: in its present condition, it is absolutely inadequate to deal with the intense traffic of passengers (the third largest in all Italy). Both structures, in fact, require some form of intervention to satisfy the growing demand, and in order to give further consolidation to the role of Catania as a European city. (D'Amico 2000).

Tourism is one of the fundamental objectives of the "Territorial Marketing Plan", being essential both for local re-qualification and for global promotion; the tourist industry, in fact, by exploiting the various resources present in the territory, could become the central and growing point of a mechanism based on the concept of Catania as a desirable destination for tourists.

On the basis of these objectives, it is easy to see that the targets to be reached, on which to concentrate the promotion activities, are essentially represented by investors in real estate and firms operating in the field of high technology, in the agroindustrial sector and in tourism.

6. Cultural Policies

The “culture system” of Catania was fairly modest until the 1980's and consisted exclusively of theatrical performances, in the field of prose dramas, opera and symphonic music, accompanied by episodic initiatives of art exhibitions and general culture. In the 1990's the cultural policies, set in motion thanks to the efforts of the local administrations, received a considerable boost. The activities of the Regional Government of the Province of Catania were particularly intense, with a series of initiatives taking place in the reclaimed area of the old sulphur refineries, known as “le Ciminiere” (“The Chimneys”). No less considerable was the activity of the City Council, which made use not only of the restored rooms in the Castello Ursino and the Benedictine Monastery, but also of the parks, the streets and the squares, dedicating to this sector a part of its own operative and financial resources, without forgetting the University which organised within its own structures a variety of exhibitions (Scrofani, 2000).

These initiatives have given a stimulus to local culture and constitute a valid attraction for tourists, and as such must be incentivated and supported by a re-organization of the museum system and by the recovery of new sites destined for use as museums and art galleries. A city which aspires to the role which should be Catania's must be equipped with theatres, large museums and facilities for congresses and trade fairs (Ruggiero L.1999).

Also the University is involved in the re-qualification programs, both as a partner for interventions of recovery and restoration of prestigious historic buildings and in the launching of new strategies, for a qualitative and quantitative development of its own product (with a demand of about 55.000 students); these strategies are based on the creation of a School for Further Education with a target of Formation of Excellence and on a number of postgraduate Master's degrees and advanced formation courses. To improve its own activities, the University relies on forms of collaboration with a number of firms, a partneriat which has given a new impetus to the development of research in advanced technologies and to the setting-up of a number of research and development structures.

7. Conclusions

Today's Catania is the result of a process of uncontrolled growth which began in the post-war period, when building was in expansion and the population was increasing day by day, altering the shape of the city and saturating the building sites; when banality took the place of beauty; when the aim was to make every single space productive, eliminating the green areas and those of social utility; when the greatness of a city was measured in quantity, not in quality.

Tomorrow's Catania, thanks to the improved governing capacity of the territory, has begun to realise a new process of economic development, based not so much on growth as on the valorisation of all its potential and on new standards of living. In harmony with the new theories for development and planning, complex processes of recovery and strategies of re-qualification are under way, based on a more careful monitoring of how the territory is used, the improvement of infrastructures, social services, culture, quality of the environment, social integration.

As far as cultural and environmental goods are concerned, particular attention has been paid to the programs for the recovery of the Old Town and the southern coastline. With reference to the productive structures the recent development of the industrial sector of a high technological content has been examined, a sector which has given Catania the name of "digital city".

The various programs which are synergistically integrated together have an ambitious and highly qualifying objective, that of transforming Catania into an entrepreneurial city, that is a city able to produce and market itself, which, thanks to its environmental and cultural goods, can interact on the market and come to terms with the business world on projects of advanced quality.

The success of the programs also depends on the involvement of the whole city, because this revitalisation must include and involve also the outlying areas, so that Catania can acquire, for all her inhabitants, the symbolic value of a "common place".

This complex recovery project becomes even more important in a moment in which the Mediterranean is re-assuming its role as a focal point and other cities are investing in re-qualification as a motor of development.

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