

# Planum

## Special Issue

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# A special issue of *Planum Magazine*: presentation

*Planum* has had a relatively long life. Conceived in 1997 at a meeting of directors and editors of the main European journals dealing with urban planning at the time and promoted within the II Biennial of European Towns and Town Planners that took place in Rome, the journal released its first issue in 1999 thanks to European financing from DG XIII Ten Telecom. The “About” tab on the website’s home page states that “*Planum* was the first European www and on-line journal entirely devoted to the planners and to the whole community of people involved in city development and the protection of the environment”.

Since then, *Planum*, designed as a free-access portal and initially a review of European journals, was modified in form and structure. This was done, first, to be able to tap into processes that affected digital publishing, and specialized publishing in particular, over this span of time; and second, to represent the substantial change that regarded the disciplinary field in the same time frame. Even its name was changed in 2011, from *Planum - the European Journal of Planning on-line* to *Planum - the Journal of Urbanism*, with a desire to mark the change in the disciplines that deal with cities and territories and their international hybridization, evident in the establishment of a new term such as *urbanism*.

The accelerated dynamics that simultaneously affected the means of communication and its object necessitated flexible publishing activity that was not always aligned with the standards progressively being seen for scientific products and their channels of diffusion.

The editorial choice has always been to favour the substantial role of cultural and scientific exchange, without overindulging in academic rules. This choice was made possible by *Planum*’s ownership (the Istituto Nazionale di Urbanistica [the Italian Planners Institute]) and the *ad hoc* constitution of an association for its management. Beside its founding members, the *Planum Association* has included a variety of ordinary members and supporters, maintaining its voluntary nature. The life of *Planum* and its dynamics are also indebted to the work of young editors that have had the capacity to mobilize and motivate many collaborators. Continuity in key roles of editorial coordination and a succession of collaborators and interns, today natives of the web, are essential aspects of its resilient nature.

Over the years, the most important modifications have led to the formation of (*Ibidem*), dedicated to reviewing texts, and *Planum Publisher*, dedicated to publishing and enhancing editorial projects. This special issue completes the path of building a real magazine with the formation of a scientific committee. The sections and an archive of some relevant paper journals (covers and indexes) and contributions that number

in the thousands, some of which are decidedly excellent, still distinguish the portal. The decision to create a scientific committee arose as a response to the need to build a network of exchange that favours a flow of contributions that sufficiently represents the research and study interests cultivated today in the different contexts. For this reason, professors with different scientific profiles have been invited to take part. They are located at numerous European schools of architecture and planning and play important individual roles in international research networks. It seemed useful to present these committee members to the many readers of *Planum* in their role as scholars, researchers, and designers, authors of texts that have marked and still mark important paths of reflection in the numerous disciplinary fields that nowadays are called urbanism. A collection of contributions therefore emerges, defined by Andrea Di Giovanni as “not designed, but not by chance, either”, precisely because they reflect the reasons underlying the formation of the panel of authors. My hope is that this special issue of the *Magazine* attracts our readers’ interest and, perhaps, solicits other contributions. Particular thanks goes to the colleagues that have willingly accepted to take part in the scientific committee and to participate in building this issue.

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# Between Republic and Democracy. Dilemmas and Perspectives in Planning Practices

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"Tra repubblica e democrazia. Alcune riflessioni sulle prospettive delle pratiche urbanistiche" in *CRIOS* no. 59, vol. 3/2012, pp. XX. © 2012

## Crisis? What crisis?

The amusing cover of the 1975 Supertramp "Crisis? What crisis?" long playing has a color photograph of a young man in a bathing suit sitting on a lounge chair under an orange umbrella. He is sipping a cocktail. The image is shown on a black and white background of garbage dumps, barracks, smoking factory chimneys. With sunglasses and a stupid expression on his face, the man seems totally unaware of his surroundings.

This famous cover can be interpreted in two ways. We might call the first one apocalyptic. It conveys the idea that we are unconsciously slipping into an abyss - an urban condition that is increasingly unacceptable from an environmental and social point of view that we are not even aware of. The second might be called post-modern. This is a "softer" portrayal of the crisis as an ultimately permanent condition in which we are called upon to live with lightness, deploying tactics rather than strategies.

I do not want to continue with my irony, but I do want to stress that in times of crisis (and today in Europe we certainly are in a time of crisis, at least economically and financially and certainly), perhaps we should learn to think about the very notion of crisis, its dependence on the "apocalyptic tone" (Derrida, 1983) that permeated the Twentieth century and which constitutes - simultaneously - our origins and our possibilities (for words and action).

In my opinion, thinking about the crisis does not mean denying its consequence but it also means putting aside its absolute and radical character, becoming wary of its "unique" nature. There is nothing non-existent or virtual about today's crisis. I only note that we should analyze the crisis considering continuity and the profound *solidarity* of daily practices (Pasqui, 2008, Sini, 2010).

This solidarity and this continuity produce differences, both in their expressions and their movements. It might be fitting to critique the praise of the every day and the "silent transformations" that discussions about planning and the city have produced abundantly over the last twenty years. However, it is not possible to deny that an anchor to practices and the real transformations of the city and the territory invite us to recognize the weight and importance of the continuity of processes and forms. This continuity is interwoven with the materiality of special interests, powers, forms of representation, and languages.

This article examines some prospects for planning practice that can comprehend today's conditions and its breaks with the past, assuming as a possible focus the dialectics between democratic and republican approaches in planning.

## Today

The first challenge lies in defining what “today” is. In a dense and beautiful text, Giorgio Agamben invites us to be wary of the notion of the contemporary condition as the “grasping” of a possible future from the darkness of the present (Agamben, 2009). Rather, we think of today and of the contemporary condition when we allow the discontinuity of different time frames and their co-presence to coexist. To me, this means observing the discontinuities and ruptures - along with their continuity - in those inextricably woven practices that overlap and intersect.

In this direction that seeks to think about the crisis within the continuity of practices, I can point out three significant shifts in planning in the Europe of today’s crisis. These three ruptures indicate both internal changes in planning practices, in its discourses and in its languages as well as, more radically, a series of effects generated externally on the changes taking place in society, in the economy and culture which influence professional, institutional and disciplinary practices.

The first is the break with the logic of growth and expansion. This is, in a non-ideological sense, a discontinuity that has been with us for at least thirty years in the awareness that planning and urban expansion in western nations do not (any longer) necessarily go hand-in-hand. It follows that at least in European and nord American cities planning is not and probably will not be primarily focused on shaping urban growth (Vv.Aa, 2006).

The second is a break with the culture and material forms of welfare which merged material and immaterial forms of welfare during the long cycle of the city of the twentieth century and which shaped infrastructure and public services that are the fabric - today increasingly frayed - of our cities as well as the legacy of a season that is, in many ways, over (Van Toorn, 2009).

The third is a break with a pedagogical idea that identifies planning with a project for civilization, facing a radical (and probably justified) mistrust of the role of expert knowledge in contemporary society and in urban plans and projects.

If we want to reframe these three shifts in terms of the fundamental and deep-rooted linkages that planning practices established with society and politics, we might say that they mark a shift in the nexus with nature, with social justice and with democracy .

These aspects do not seem so distant from the “new urban question” evoked by Bernardo Secchi in several recent texts (Secchi, 2010). This is an environmental and climate-related question and a new social question (Soja, 2010). It is the rethinking of the issue of citizenship in relation to urban and social processes of augmented mobility (Ohnmacht, Maskim, Bergman, 2011).

We must still ponder - in closer and more pragmatics ways - whether this way of “narrating” the novelty of our practices is effective, or whether we should also try to measure what we do, what happens, and the maturing relationships between powers and knowledge in the ordinary practices of territorial transformation and management.

## Words and *stimmungen*

First I would like to observe the dominant “moods” in the discourses about, and in, planning.

I speak of moods [*stimmungen*] to indicate that they are not vague feelings, points of view and value orientations, but concrete ways of experiencing practices and caring for our knowledge and know-how. Initially, and without any pretense of completeness, I will identify at least four different inflections.

The first refers to resignation when facing a condition in which critical aspirations appear to be mute in an increasingly evanescent public sphere. This resignation con-

stantly evokes the vision of the end of planning which is increasingly out of synch with public agendas and increasingly marginalized in academic and professional domains.

The flip side of resignation is a self-referential stance, embodied in the language of “crisis” (in planning, urban design, architecture, the city) to which we react with closure within abstract circuits and forms of discussion through a kind of extra-disciplinary escapism that appears, in the best of cases, unfounded.

A second inflection is cynicism. Cynicism has become a key to interpreting the role that professional practices - increasingly detached not only from pedagogical orientation but also from any distance from the context of action - play in certifying interests and power structures. In its “cynical” narrative, planning accompanies processes and certifies them, supports manipulation, veils interests and power relations, and relinquishes any critical claim.

Millenarianism is a third inflection. As opposed to cynicism, it identifies epochal changes and proposes radical output that is both cultural and political. Some variations are highly critical of the current state of things. Others impose imagining completely “other” forms and practices even if they are, necessarily, in the minority. Finally, a fourth inflection seems unable to grasp effective power relations and at the same time overestimates practices ultimately marginal in terms of investments and resources devoted to them, but also in terms of effectiveness that they were able to manifest later.

Each inflection has some evident foundations. Each says something about the production of practices and the meaning attributed to them. None, however, seem to be adequate enough for action that is both realistic and not resigned

### **Practices: states of exception, de-politicization, legitimation, sidestepping**

We can identify some common features in exceptional experiences but also in the everyday practices that characterized planning as a profession and as an institutional activity for the regulation and management of the territory over the last years. These common features have complex and ambiguous relationships with the previously described inflections.

I am not going to offer a systematic view of the situation which should be supported by an empirical investigation into the “daily work” of planning (which and how many plans and urban projects are implemented, by whom, using what skills, with what kinds of relationships with the client, in what relation to research and education, and so on ...). I would merely like to attempt, tentatively and incompletely, to indicate some signs that seem characteristic of certain interpretations and inflections that the practices offer to a first glance.

The first feature is the progressive shift of local government activities into the sphere of the *exception*. Managing the territory seems to mean responding to some kind of emergency, which necessarily involves the suspension of standard regulations and the assumption of a logic tied to a “state of exception.”

Whether it is the organization of major events (like Olympics or Expos) or the management of environmental emergencies (waste, mobility, location of new power plants with great environmental impacts), post-disaster reconstruction, or the construction of huge infrastructures, the activities on various governmental levels are increasingly based on a watch-dog logic, on special procedures, and on irresponsible subjects. The effectiveness of this “exceptionalism” - even in terms of policy analysis - is dubious. Certainly, this logic also shapes routine practices, redirecting attention to (presumed) efficiency, further weakening the possibility of creating a public debate that is not geared towards radical opposition or that is driven only by the encounter of, and conflict between, apparently legitimate technical knowledge

and expertise (Healey, 2010)

The second feature - the radical *de-politicization* of local planning practices - is strongly connected to the first. In part, it derives from a strategy that, in the 1990s, assigned a central role to some “excellent” technostructures - according to UE dictates. This de-politicization is closely related to the suspension (Hirschman, 1982) - or perhaps to the end - of forms of political representation and more general issues of representation upon which the bonds between territorial government and politics were based. On the other hand, this de-politicization does not mean that interests and powers did not confront the domain of the management of territorial transformation. Today, as always, planning decision-making is one of the critical terrains for power struggles on local and supra-local levels (Fainstein, 2010). This means only that the degree of transparency of the discussion and decision has been negligible and that very rarely were government choices regarding the city and territory truly placed at the heart of the political agenda and debate - intended as a confrontation of different regulatory prospects.

The third feature is the result of the second one. Especially in routine practice, it was the domain of an approach that saw planning as the *technical certification* of political choices and power relations. In many local contexts and in many plans, programs or projects, planning has not really acted as technical support for transparent policy choices from the point of view that Luigi Mazza has repeatedly proposed. I am saying that the role of planning (and architecture: See Ponzini, Nastasi, 2011) was to “veil” conflicts and choices through the (technical) legitimization of strictly political decisions (Sager, 2010).

Finally, the fourth feature is the *sidestepping* of power and conflict through which - partly due to naivety and partly intentionally- certain rhetoric (for example participation or integrated policies for urban regeneration) has avoided coming to terms with the harshness of the processes in act, settling for activating interesting - but ultimately marginal - courses of action (Friedmann, 2011).

The four inflections certainly do not include the totality of the complexity and expressions of planning practices. However, in their more or less obvious connections, they seem to outline an image of the whole upon which we can reflect together.

### **Universalism and differences**

I do not claim, nor do I have the available resources, to completely illustrate the consequences of the distinguishing features of the planning practices that I have tried to describe. In this context, if my arguments have some strength, I would be satisfied with revisiting - in a cross-cutting way - some of the topics that I have mentioned. I will start with an issue that seems particularly important in the context that I have tried to describe: the management of differences and its complex relationship with universalistic needs deriving from the more radical and profound claims of the traditions and legacies of spatial planning (Hall, 1988; Taylor, 1998).

The reasons underlying this important and complex question are both far-ranging and specific in nature. In general terms, the complex expression of the possible links between claims based on both the universal and difference is *the* problem of advanced Western societies at the crossroads of globalization processes.

The question certainly takes on many different forms but it is tied to the redefinition, suspension and crisis in representative democracy and in politics in general, along with the notion of general interest representing a decisive background for spatial planning practices (Moroni, 2004). It also is connected to problems posed to any kind of local government action by the radical support of a “society of differences.”

I will not refer to the broader and more cross-cutting conditions underlying this issue insofar as the references to the debate that, in different forms, intersects philos-

ophy, political science, geography, and social analysis are vast. However, I do believe that a lucid position regarding the problem is expressed by Tzvetan Todorov (2002, 2006), who, by proposing the “spirit of the Enlightenment” in critical form, emphasizes its difficult, always precarious and essential *need for universality* in the context of the “discovery of others in their originality.” Not to mention, as the “political” Derrida invites us to do in his texts on the “democracy to come” (Derrida, 1994, 2003), that the need for the universal is ultimately inherent in the European tradition, and therefore largely interwoven with deeper claims for political, economic and cultural colonization of “other” vital worlds that accompanied the globalization process - and still do (Nancy, 2002).

I merely point out that this issue lies at the heart of the attempts to rethink the traditions and political cultures of modernity and later of the Twentieth century (liberalism, socialism, communitarianism, and so forth) along with the more incisive thinking about the *paradoxes* of democratic theory. It also lies at the heart of the re-affirmation of new and more complete forms of universalism (on a planetary scale, but also on the continental and national ones) as well as the configuration of new difference-based political and social practices geared toward the reconstruction of nations, communities, identities.

But some reasons are far more specific and closer to our practices. These drive us to seek - in the complex chiasm between universalism and a difference-based approach - the background for identifying (and possibly facing) the “crisis” in our knowledge and know-how. In the following paragraphs, I will indicate three.

The first reason for the particular importance of this issue in planning practices is linked to the need to rethink the relationship between *local and supra-local decision-making* practices. This relationship was traditionally a central issue in the construction of strategies for legitimating regulatory land-use practices. This question not only relates to the increasingly important problems of so-called “vertical governance” within a context of unraveling institutional relations; but more radically today, it is a question of rethinking the issue of the self-government of communities faced with the expropriation of democratic decision-making processes concerning an extremely important number of supra-local collective choices (from the location of major infrastructure or the planning of services to important investment decisions) in a context, which I have already mentioned, that merges emergency-related concerns and de-politicization.

The second reason is deeply rooted in the history of spatial planning. It is tied to a differentiated or unitary treatment of places in urban planning practices. The issue regards primarily, but not exclusively, conflicts relating to land use. More in general, the question concerns the testing of the legitimacy of, and the possibility for, the radically *differential treatment* of places in the regulation and planning of the city and the region faced with the growing pluralistic expressions of interests along with the increasingly difficult legibility of the contemporary city and its forms of social and spatial organization (Innes, Booher, 2011).

Finally, the third reason for the relevance and importance of the relationships between universalism and differentialism in practices regarding the use of the city is tied to the difficulty in thinking simultaneously about sovereignty, citizenship and spatial regulation in a context of the radical “*pluralization*” of *uses and habits* that “dissociate” territory and sovereignty (Balducci, Fedeli, Pasqui, 2011) and that raise - in a view that sees the territory as “the use made of it” (Crosta, 2010) - a complex series of questions regarding the management of this pluralism.

## Republicanism and pluralism

If we assume (at least for now) that the issue is important, we could say that the narratives and dominant moods, as well as the daily practices, can hardly face it completely.

Recently Luigi Mazza proposed an explicitly “republican” perspective regarding what he defines today with increasing insistence as “spatial planning” starting from a radical critique of strategic planning.

Inspired by an idea of republicanism as a “civil religion” (Petitt, 1999; Rusconi, 1999) that can mobilize “civic virtue” and, rethinking the issue of citizenship in a radical way, Mazza perseveres in pursuing an hypothesis of what he calls a complete planning system in which “a higher-level framework” (in relation to the local level) becomes the condition for legitimating supra-local choices. He maintains that “developing strategies is very difficult, not to say impossible, if the State does not retrieve its authority and commitment to coordinating planning functions to all levels” (Mazza, 2010: 7).

In Mazza’s view, there is no opposition between the authority and legitimacy of the central state in relation to supra-local choices and self-government on the local level. Indeed, “crucial to the republican model is the theme of self-government, which can constitute a benchmark for evaluating public policies, in the sense that it holds out the option of considering good policies to be those functional above all to the development of democracy as self-government” (Mazza, 2010: 8). And again, “Outside a republican scheme, planning activities are principally instruments for legitimising vested interests and facilitating theory investments “ (Mazza, 2010: 8).

It is not my intention to discuss Mazza’s point of view in detail. It is, above all and explicitly, a *regulative ideal*, which, when it becomes a political project, must certainly face the difficulties inherent in such a perspective within a context of institutional weakness and the prevalence of individualistic cultures and “proprietary” logic - at least as far as Italy is concerned (Lanzani, Pasqui, 2011).

I would like to stress that Mazza’s “republican” proposal is located at the heart of the issue that I have tried to highlight. On the one hand, it is based on the question of general interest, starting from the sharing – by the majority - of principles and civic virtues, thus giving a clear priority to national choices over local ones when such choices conflict. On the other hand, he adopts a radical idea regarding self-governing communities on a scale that is small enough to ensure that the mechanisms of representative democracy can guarantee effective control of the governors by the governed. He proposes an idea of local plans that are both politically legitimate tools for spatial control as well as strategies for the future shared by communities living in their plurality and autonomy .

In this context, a “differentialist” position is not abandoned even if it appears rooted in the standard instruments of representative democracy rather than in practices of self-government of communities based on direct participation free of interference in public decision-making. However, this is tempered by a strong injection of universalism as “institutional patriotism” embodied in the State and in its cultural manifestations and policies.

The consequences for the role of planning practices (or rather, spatial planning) are based on two principles. On the one hand, “It is not the task of planning to contribute directly to the political debate on the approaches that must form the reference framework for the action of government” (Mazza, 2010, p. 9). In other words, technique and policy must be radically separated, in order to avoid any confusion and illusion regarding the the role of the planner as someone who takes a partisan view or promotes more or less manipulative forms of consensus building. On the other hand “technical planning culture has a responsibility to clarify which

theoretical approaches should underpin the principles on which techniques base the models for possible planning systems and which principles these models wish to follow” (Mazza, 2010, p. 9). That is to say that the role of spatial planning is not only to certify choices dictated by more or less legitimate interests but rather to affirm that the public interest prevails over the individual one - in a republican perspective.

## Conclusions

This is not the place for a critique of Luigi Mazza’s “republican” proposal. I only note that this point of view - while directly and explicitly addressing the dilemma of the (possible) presence or conflict between universalist claims (and citizenship) and “differentialist” openness - poses more of a problem in the interpretation of the concept of difference (and differences).

If difference is a social product, historically determined as the overall outcome of social practices, then we must recognize that any unitary treatment of the concept of difference (something other than inequality and which can play a potentially progressive and innovative role) faces more than one risk. These are not abstract questions. I will cite only two examples. First, let us think of the radical intractability of the housing issue outside the recognition of its irreducibility to social demand - that is the way in which changes in life styles question not only “administrative” models regarding housing but also the most innovative attempts over the last twenty years to reframe and redefine “housing policy” (Lund, 2011). Or let us reflect upon the challenge to the “welfare” logic underlying the location of services - still very present in routine planning experiences - by erratic forms of mobility (Kaufmann, 2011) but more generally by the “pluralization” of the use of urban space by populations that cannot be reduced to a single and ordered form of representation.

In both cases, the abandonment of a “unitaristic” logic defies any simplistic conception of spatial citizenship and requires planning to know how to “think by differences” that are its own but that today must be revisited in a non-identity related or “essentialist” key that can above all think of differences first and foremost in their production and reproduction within social practices situated in time and space.

Yet, a difference-based approach alone, even if it is not thoughtless and well-tempered in order to avoid “individualist” and “localistic” implications, is probably not enough. The difficulties highlighted in the recognition of a public sphere that shares issues regarding the city and territory, the prevalence in the forms of action and attitudes like the ones described above, and the same moods that accompany this “minor” condition of planning question our need to inhabit the very difficult ridge between universalistic needs and differentialistic claims.

The first appear to be necessary if we want to give authority and legitimacy back to managing the frenzied urban and territorial transformations under way. On the one hand, they remind us of the importance of simple rules that are as certain, universal, transparent, and legitimate as possible. On the other, they remind us of the importance of taking responsibility, on all levels, for indicating directions and priorities.

The second, universalistic claims, instead points out the “vortex” of the complexity (but also the capacity for innovation) of local communities, inviting us to shape strategies that can “make room” for social practices without taking on any manipulative connotations.

I am speaking of the radical recognition of social pluralism and the intelligence of society, without an “aesthetic” conception that is content to narrate this plurality and that is nevertheless without the pretense of governing from the top down (we have understood that this is simply no longer possible, at least within pluralistic systems). I am speaking of setting into motion practices and experimentation that leverage the complex interplay between practices and structured fields, between conditions of

possibility and the constraints inherent in the transit of individuals and populations within their own practices and in relation to their “support” - made up of places and spaces, things and rules, materials and experiences.

In contrast, I am speaking of becoming responsible in the face of the universal need for social and spatial justice, for new approaches to citizenship and even for a new encyclopedia of rights that is created inductively and incrementally.

This dual need requires us to be wary of and suspend the moods to which I referred previously.

On the other hand, it elicits a possible response that can place planning practices within the materiality of the economic, social, political and cultural processes of the contemporary world, joining a realistic assessment of the possibilities for action with a critical and reflective scrutiny of the practices to which we are subject.

It is an evidently narrow ridge that I can only indicate here as an inevitable condition if we want to become wary of communitarian or identity-related claims as such, but also to be suspicious of universalistic processes veiling power relations and forms of domination (Derrida, Roudinesco, 2011). If, in other words, we still want to think about the future and the very possibility of the other and of its inclusion.

This “other”, as Carlo Sini explains in the final wonderful pages of a recent book (*Da parte a parte*); it is here with us, living quietly within us. It allows us to present a eulogy for the relative, and differences, that is not an irresponsible relativism and that presumes the “hard” and conflicted nature of the practices of interaction between interests, individuals and cultures (Sini, 2008).

The ridge we are crossing forces us to bring into play both our moods as well as the drift of our practices, putting to work a critical realism (Palermo, Ponzini, 2011) that is not merely a statement of principle but a reflective approach to professional practice and institutional research.

There are no complete answers to these questions, as these pages show. At best, I have framed the issues and expressed the need to explore them without irresponsible digressions and without relinquishing a proper critical distance.

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