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Urban Design Ecologies
Madalina Ghibusi Federica Marchetti

URBAN DESIGN

Madalina Ghibusi
Federica Marchetti

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Urban Design Ecologies

Projects for City Environments

edited by
Madalina Ghibusi Federica Marchetti


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Policies and Urban Design

Gabriele Pasqui

What is a (public) policy?

A public policy, according to William N. Dunn, is “the set of actions performed by a group of subjects (the actors), which are in some way related to the solution of a collective problem, ie a need, an opportunity or an unsatisfied demand, which is generally considered to be of public interest” (Dunn 1981).

As the Italian scholar Bruno Dente has underlined, this definition does not mean that the subjects of the action must be exclusively public, even if it is improbable that among those who act in relation to problems perceived as collective there are not actors with political and administrative legitimation. On the other side, Dunn’s definition does not say that all actions must be aimed at solving the problem: it is more than probable, indeed, that some of the actors would like to sidestep them. But above all, the definition does not say that public policies are only the activities carried out by public authorities. Other actors and interests are involved, specific policy networks are engaged in facing problems (perceived as) relevant in the public sphere. This means in other words that public policies are not tout court comparable to a function of the State or other public bodies (Dente 2011).

If we consider the project for Scalo Porta Romana presented in this book, under the general framework of an ecological strategy for the city, we



have to admit that this project should be described as dowels of a complex public policy. In this chapter I will try to discuss different aspects of the potential connections between design and policy processes.

What is a public problem?

The first feature of the definition of public policies by Dunn is that they are connected with problems perceived as relevant in the public sphere. The question is: why and when a problem becomes *public*? Let us start with an example. Why the disposal of a rail yard in a city is a public problem? Which are the reasons for designing and implementing a public policy addressed to the reuse of a partially abandoned rail yard, such as the area of Porta Romana in Milan?

There are many possible answers to this question. First of all, the problem is not the same for all the actors involved. The actor who owns the areas (Sistemi Urbani, who manages the transformation of the rail yards for the public Railway company Ferrovie dello Stato), wants to get capital gains through the redevelopment, selling the areas at private developers for the highest possible value. The Municipality wants to generate new services, public and green spaces, housing and to strengthen the regional public transport system. The citizens, and especially local groups and associations, want to reuse the rail yards for local services and do not want new housing.

This means that the problem of the reuse of rail yards is perceived in different ways. We could say that it is not the same problem for all the actors. The identification of different representations and dimensions of the problem, in the design process, is the first analytical step to pursue. Public problems are social constructs, strictly connected with the processes of agenda setting.

What is an urban agenda?

If we want to identify and understand the complex nature of a public problem we have to put it in the context of a wider urban agenda, whose characters depend on a complex process of agenda setting.

An urban agenda can be defined as a set of issues and their representations which a local political community (a network of actors in which public institutions play an important, but not exclusive, role) considers politically central and to which it commits its own collective effort and action, above all by pursuing and implementing public policies. The urban agenda is

influenced by different factors of a political and cultural nature. It depends on the local, national and supra-national political cycle, on the dominant rhetoric in the political discourse and in public opinion, on the interaction between choices of policy, on the construction of problems by the media and on the general vision that predominates in civil society and among citizens. The construction of the urban agenda does not lie exclusively in the hands of politicians or public administrations. Nevertheless, public actions can influence the agenda through a selective process which places some collective issues at the top of the agenda and excludes others.

In this phase the reuse of half-abandoned rail yards has been at the top of the Milanese urban agenda. The new Mayor Giuseppe Sala, elected in 2016, has declared that the redevelopment of the rail yards is a strategic occasion for the redefinition of the spatial development of the city. For this reason, each project for the rail yards, and also the “ecological” project for Porta Romana presented and discussed in this book, should take into consideration the role of the rail yards in the general urban strategies represented in the urban agenda. The urban design of each railway area has to be considered part of a wider urban strategy, that is both spatial and socio-economic.

Which kind of policies are urban policies?

If we want to build up an urban strategy for the reuse of big areas, such as the rail yards in Milan, we need not only good design strategies, but also complex integrated urban policies. An urban policy is not sectoral, even if it is strictly connected to different sectoral policies. For example, an urban policy for the rail yards is necessarily integrated with environmental, infrastructural, housing and economic issues.

Which are the characters of urban policies?

According to Allan Cochrane, urban policies actively shapes the ways in which people live in cities. As well as reflecting contemporary understandings of the role of cities in economic and social development, urban policy also helps to create those understandings. Definitions of urban policy are elusive in part because the term appears so self-explanatory. It seems to be no more and no less than the sum of those policies that are intended to help cities or those living in them. Unfortunately, however, this commonsense approach is ultimately not very helpful – since most of us now live in urban areas of one sort or another, almost all public policy might be deemed to be urban policy. Assessing quite why one particular form of policy intervention attracts the sobriquet *urban* while another does not is more difficult than at first appears. Although there is a

superficial continuity in the emphasis on *urban areas* rather than particular welfare client groups, the definition of the *urban* on which policy attention is focused has itself varied significantly, even if this has rarely been acknowledged by those making or implementing the policies (Cochrane 2007). A policy is urban if it is involved in the definition and treatment of an urban problem, spatially defined, in which different dimensions can be recognized and enacted.

Paolo Fareri, an important scholar in the field of urban policies (Fareri 2009), underlines that these policies are integrated with respect to different dimensions of sector intervention (urban planning, environment, public green, local welfare, local economic policies and active labor, home, transport and mobility policies, security, etc.). Moreover, urban policies can be considered as an experimental field of institutional and social innovation, in relation to the emergence of problems (perceived as) crucial in the urban sphere.

What is a policy process?

Public policies are not decisions. They are complex processes involving a set of actors, interests, strategies and forms of rationality. Literature has identified different stages of policy process (issue identification, agenda setting, policy formulation, policy adoption and legitimization, policy implementation). In a policy process, there is uncertainty about objectives and outcomes, and also ambiguity about the nature of the problems and the matching between problems and solutions.

If we consider carefully the policy process that has led to the definition of a new planning framework for the railway areas in Milan (Pasqui 2017), we can observe that the process has been long and not linear, with changes in the nature of the problem and in the features of the solutions. This means that a design strategy that comes at the end of a complex process should take into account this complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty. The design strategy should not be a definite "final state of the world", but a part of a process, where different possibilities are open and time matters.

Designing in contexts of uncertainty and ambiguity means imagining a flexible, open and dynamic design path. For all these reasons, a project for urban environments should also be a flexible temporal strategy that is able to identify alternative possibilities and bifurcations. This is the main argument for the experimentation of temporary uses, that could be the tools for opening the areas to citizens and different public and private uses in the short period.

Why conflicts matter?

If policy processes are complex, uncertain, ambiguous, we cannot forget that they are also conflicted. If we analyze the policy process concerning the rail yards in Milano, we can see that many different processes have taken place in the last 10 years. It is important to reflect on the fact that these processes were not only traditional conflicts between contrasting interests and actors sharing the same cultural framework. This is only a part of the story. Following a suggestion by the Italian sociologist Alessandro Pizzorno (1993), we can identify three different kind of conflicts in the urban context.

In the interest conflicts the parties belong to the same system of relations and the conflicts are pluralistic and not exclusive. In the recognition conflicts a social group enters the conflict in order to impose the recognition of its own distinct identity that is non-negotiable and that can be constituted and/or strengthened in the conflict. In the ideological conflicts one or both sides present themselves with a universalistic presumption, and then arrangements and mediations are often difficult.

In the context of Milanese urban transformations all these kinds of conflicts can be observed. The distinction between different typologies of conflicts is important for urban designers, because these conflicts are representative of different expectations and social demands. Some of these expectations and demands probably should not be taken into consideration in the design strategy, but the project should take care of different conflicted positions.

When (and why) can a policy be effective?

The effectiveness of a public policy depends on two different dimensions. On one side, the choice of specific policy (and planning, and design) tools that fit with a specific problem and context. On the other side, the design of forms and practices of interaction that can generate positive social mechanisms. According to Salamon "a tool, or instrument, of public action can be defined as an identifiable method through which collective action is structured to address a public problem" (Salamon 2002, 20). Each tool plays a role in the process of distinguishable policy design, and structures the networks of actors (for example, positioning them on the basis of advantages or disadvantages in carrying out certain actions) in response to certain public problems.

There are different typologies of policy tools (rules and regulations, incentives, agreements, information and communication, standards and best practices), but what is crucial is the fact that each tool should be chosen not on the basis of a given blueprint, but in connection with the specific problem and context. On the other side, that policy tools are not political neutral, and the selection of one instrument or another for a policy intervention will generate political activity and have political consequences. More importantly, political factors and political mobilization affect the initial selection of instruments and the ultimate implementation of policy. Attempting, therefore, to assess policy outcomes without also considering the means to be employed to achieve those ends as well as the politics shaping tool choices is likely to result in potentially faulty policy decision.

Good and adequate policy tools are not enough. Each policy process is a social interactive process, in which institutions, social and economic collective actors, citizens are involved in complex forms of cooperation and conflict. For this reason, the correct identification and design of policy tools should be paired by the promotion of effective social mechanisms. A mechanism is a pattern of influence among actors that can activate or strengthen the social resources, coordinating efforts of the actors (individuals, institutions) in order to reach the expected results. It is not possible to forecast the future behaviour of social actors, but through the identification of social mechanisms it is possible to favour cooperative processes and to reduce conflicts.

The identification of policy tools and the attempt to promote effective social mechanisms are parts of the fundamental implementation activity. When a policy decision is taken, and when a design tool is defined, it is necessary to design an implementation strategy, able to work in time through time, to face surprises and unexpected events.

Policy implementation can be defined as the last stage of policy cycle and it means an institutional, administrative and social process in which various actors, organization, procedures, and techniques work together to put adopted policies into effect in an effort to attain policy or policy goals (Barrett and Fudge 1981; Bardach 1977). Implementation is not only a technical procedure. Policy implementation can be seen as a tension generating force in society between and within different components of the implementing process: idealized policy, implementing organization, target group, and environmental factors. The tensions result in transaction patterns which may or may not match the expectations of outcome of the policy formulators. When a project is completed, its implementation has to be started, as the next section of this book, about *program*, shows clearly.

Why institutional arrangements matter?

Even if a policy is not only the action promoted by public body, institutional frameworks and arrangements are crucial in order to enhance the effectiveness of a public policy.

If we consider the design issues connected with the transformation of the rail yards in Milan, it is clear the role of public institutions is important not only because each urban transformation is regulated by planning schemes and rules, but also because there are different fundamental key passages in the process that can be managed only by the public administration. If the public administration is not able to define clearly the regulative framework, the uncertainty grows up and the effectiveness decreases.

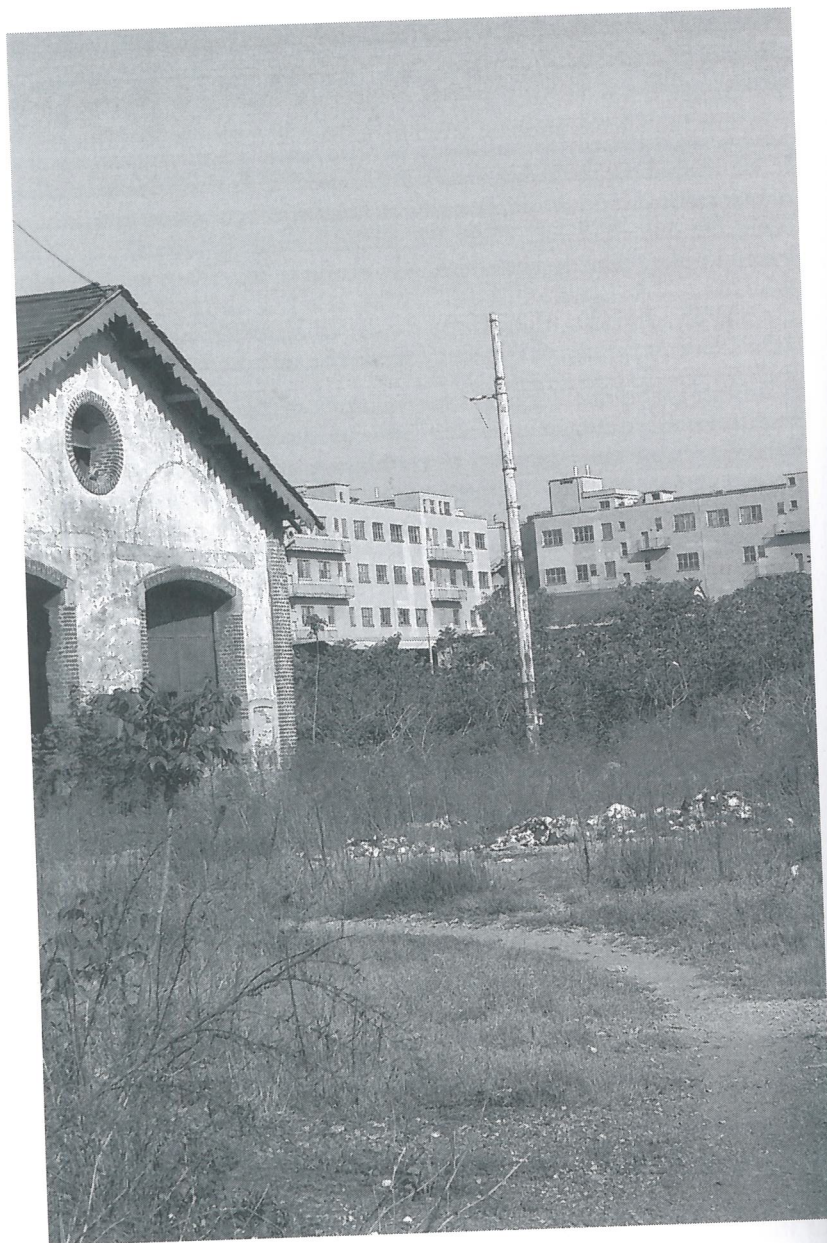
Institutional arrangements can be interpreted also as different formal and informal regimes and coalitions for collective action and inter-agent coordination, ranging from public-private cooperation and contracting schemes, organizational networking to policy arrangements. These arrangements are commonly defined as the *rules of the game*, including norms, beliefs, values, habits and behaviour. They include both formal and informal arrangements, they can range from local to global level, and may give rise to compliance or resistance. Actor-structure interactions frequently include ambiguities and competing claims that result from path-dependence. Consequently, many actors are simultaneously involved in multiple, and sometimes conflicting, institutional arrangements.

Without effective institutional arrangements, the policy process should not be able to develop in time, and different forms of paralysis, conflicts, and decisional stalls can take place.

How urban design can be integrated in a policy process?

Urban design, for example the projects for Scalo Porta Romana that are presented in this book, can be integrated in a complex policy process if design strategies are able to interact with the different dimensions of the policy process (problem setting, implementation, conflicts, tools and mechanisms, institutional arrangements). This integration is coherent with a conception of public policies that identifies three different ideas of a policy.

The first one is the idea of policy as decision. A policy is also an event that breaks consolidated equilibriums, produces new states of the world and new meanings. This dimension cannot be avoided



and implies the idea of public action as an unbalancing activity. The second one is the idea of policy as social interaction. Policy activity not only occurs in a plural context (many actors, many interests, many values, many visions of the world), but is intrinsically produced "via interaction". The third one is the idea of policy as exploration. In this sense policies are cognitive practices, in which hypotheses and interpretations are "tested" and "probed" (Lindblom 1990). The activity of policy making in this declination is an "inquiry" activity, in the perspective of the theory of inquiry by John Dewey. This inquiry activity also has a *social* and transactive nature.

What is interesting is that also design (urban and architectural) can be defined as a decision, breaking spatial equilibrium and identifying new formal possibilities; as a process of social interaction involving designers, clients, institutions, citizens; as an experimental research process. Urban design and urban policy should work together: only if the policy dimension is integrated in the design process, and vice versa, it is possible to experiment an effective process of urban change.