Transport and urban planning in Rome: an unholy marriage?

Aurélien Delpirou

Aurélien Delpirou brings a new perspective to the debate initiated by Luis Santos y Ganges[1]. *He highlights the fact that urban planning policy alone, even when based on the development of rail infrastructure, does not make for a city. The example of the Italian capital shows that, when it comes to integrated urban development, plans are there only to set the ground rules for a game played by other participants. These plans are confronted with not only the contradictions of sustainable development, but also the inertia of relations between the municipal government and developers.*[2]

Since the early 1990s, the principle of sustainable development and its establishment as a standards framework have made integrated urban planning and transport policies the new benchmark for urban planning in Europe, to the point where it is perhaps even too frequently cited as a cure-all (Offner 2007). In Rome, the policy implemented between 1993 and 2008 by the centre-left city council was very much inspired by this paradigm – indeed, so much so that it became known as the "Roman development model" (Marcelloni 2003). This is a spectacular turnaround for a city that, until recently, was consistently dubbed the "bottom of the class in European urban planning" (Insolera 1962) and regarded as the quintessential example of public transport that doesn't work and the perverse effects of urban planning through speculative action.

From "bottom of the class" to "the Roman model"?

One of the major operations of the turn of the 21ˢᵗ century was without doubt Rome's extensive rail infrastructure modernisation programme, involving extensions to the two existing metro lines, the creation of a third line and the rehabilitation of abandoned or underused regional rail links. This *cura del ferro* ("railway therapy") was not just a technical project: in a city marked by a century of unchecked urban development, mobility strategies formed the basis of urban policy renewal.

Indeed, Rome city council's new *Piano Regolatore Generale* (general master plan), or PRG,[3] reads like a summary of all the "integrated planning" experiments conducted in Europe over the last 20 years. On the one hand, the plan's technical standards impose a limitation on construction rights upstream of projects, depending on the level of rail accessibility: urban development is conditional upon the presence or the creation of a station on the urban or regional rail network. On the other

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[1] Luis Santos y Ganges & translated by Eric Rosencrantz, "Integrating the train into the city: some thoughts from Spain", *Metropolitics*, 21 September 2011. URL: http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Integrating-the-train-into-the.html.

[2] See: Guilhem Dupuy & translated by Michael Stokes, "The mayor, the developer and low-cost home ownership. Negotiations between developers and local representatives in housing programmes", *Metropolitics*, 3 December 2010. URL: http://www.metropolitiques.eu/The-mayor-the-developer-and-low.html.

[3] The PRG (general master plan), an all-encompassing instrument of Italian planning that has existed for some 150 years, is both a planning document that describes the broad lines of the city's key development options and an extremely detailed operational tool.

hand, the PRG seeks to concentrate suburban development around the most important stations, by putting these stations at the heart of new "metropolitan centralities". If we consider the typology of planning methods for urban sustainability drawn up by Vincent Kaufmann *et al.* (2004), the policy implemented in Rome is both "interventionist" – urban development is conditional upon accessibility standards – and "offer-based" – transport infrastructures are deployed to ensure accessibility and thus structure urban growth.

However, recent research has highlighted the disparities between the intentions of urban policies and the reality of changes on the ground (Nessi 2006; Delpirou 2009). The link between transport and urban development is often compromised by the territorial and political heritage of the Italian capital.

Densifying a sprawling city

First, municipal ambitions have been limited by the fact that the forces that shape the city act very slowly. Rome City Council has always had to negotiate with powerful property owners and developers in order to orient urban development or equip and serve newly urbanised areas. However, the favourable property market of the 2000s, seen as one of the driving forces of the capital's economic revival, has reduced the city council's room for manoeuvre. Some virtuous counterexamples, such as Parco Leonardo,[4] cannot mask the fact that a "cubic-metre culture" and an obsession with land consumption are highly ingrained among Roman developers, whose activities have perpetuated low-density suburban development, often without any improvements in public transport performance upstream. As Walter Tocci, the former first deputy mayor of Rome (1993–2000) reminds us, "you can't go from a century of speculative wheeling and dealing to sustainable urban development in just 10 years."

Second, the potential for urban development around stations has been overestimated. "The stations that offer the necessary conditions for significant densification can be counted on the figures of one hand," reckons Massimo Mengoni, former managing director of Risorse per Roma (literally "Resources for Rome"), the company responsible for promoting and reusing railway land. Indeed, most of the modernised regional rail lines were originally built in the late 19th century, without any regard to the city's development; many of them run for several miles through non-urbanised areas. Above all, densification measures have been faced with virulent opposition from environmental circles. At the lowest level, pressure from green politicians has contributed to the preservation by default of all green spaces: parks have been defined as territorial features that must not be modified, at the expense of compromising operations that would offer truly integrated transport and urban development. On a larger scale, associations have managed – in the name of preservation of quality of life – to obtain the application of strict standards concerning housing density and neighbourhood green spaces. These measures have led to a form of Malthusianism in urban planning.

Beyond these classic contradictions in the objectives of sustainable urban development, one cannot help but notice that the renewed interest in high population densities has only marginally influenced the urban planning community in Rome. In the Italian capital, there is no "cultural consensus" regarding increasingly compact cities: "the notion of densification within a consolidated city stems from the abstract application of foreign models that have no connection with Rome's history, its specificities or the conflicts that have characterised the management of the city over the last 30 years" (Roberto Morassut, deputy mayor responsible for urban planning between 2001 and 2008).

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[4] This vast residential, retail and services complex, located some 20 km (12.5 miles) south of the Capitoline Hill, close to Fiumicino airport, has benefited from the prior construction – at the developer's expense – of a dedicated station on Rome's main suburban rail line.

Third, the sheer scale of the disparities between urban planning and the reality of territorial developments bears witness to the historical inadequacies of operational urban development in Italy: although preliminary studies and regulations are always highly detailed, the links between these initial phases and the later stages of projects remain patchy at best. For example, the promotion of joint management of mobility and land use has been hindered by the absence of sustainable project management structures. What is the point of urban planning if the planning bodies seem to be routinely sidestepped and the majority of their tools and procedures are, to varying extents, free from public scrutiny? Rome City Council's failures with regard to integrated urban planning serve as a reminder that planning regulations alone do not make a city: for all its innovations, Rome's new PRG is limited to setting the rules for a game dominated by other players.[5] Its failure must be analysed in the light of contemporary thinking on the social uses of law and on the way in which sustainable cities are built.

Furthermore, the chronic situation of conflict that has reigned within Rome's institutional context – marked by competition between different levels of intervention, slim financial margins for manoeuvre and the absence of a metropolitan authority capable of prioritising projects – has undeniably been a significant barrier to the integration of urban policies.

The necessary territorialisation of sustainable urban planning policies

Ultimately, the difficulties in promoting a compact city model, whether on the scale of a whole metropolitan area or on the level of individual projects, demonstrate the unsuitability of this strategy for Rome, a city whose development is born out of speculative, sprawling growth and a functionalist vision of urban planning. This impasse serves as a reminder that the same remedies do not always produce the same effects: the effectiveness of planning policies will vary according to the nature of the territories to which they are applied. Accordingly, the dissemination of "best public practice" will be in vain if it is not accompanied by a greater awareness of the specificities of different urban contexts, institutional configurations and local politics.

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[5] The situation in Rome cannot be used to make generalisations about Italy as a whole: the move towards greater federalism has enabled each region to develop its own planning instruments; highly diverse situations exist, with significant differences between the north and south of Italy.

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