Consolidating Public Urban Policies into a Single Project

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1. The theme of urban conflict seems to be once again at the heart of debates on policies in several European countries. One might indeed wonder why it had faded into the background at all in recent years. What is certain is that housing conditions ("housing conditions" referring to a general condition which does not concern the state of the housing structure) in European cities have a lot in common. The specific problems met by each individual country, although they are important, are only part of the problem. There must therefore be a more general, common explanation for the recent developments in the building markets and more particularly in the housing markets: their evolution has fast revealed a dramatically widening gap between the quality and quantity of the housing supply and actual user demand. As is invariably the case, this renewed interest in the housing problem is the result of a new situation of potential conflict in the housing market after years of relative stability. There are two phenomena that are worth mentioning: First, this latent (and in some cases patent) conflict is part of a context dominated by an attempt at urban marketing in which all large cities stress the harmony, the quality of life and the standard of living they can offer. This marketing trend is in full expansion: if the urban conflicts were to break again, a hard blow would be dealt to the cities concerned in terms of their credibility and of their image. Secondly, it must be stressed that conflicts may arise irrespective of the politics of local authorities; even where considerable attention has been paid to social questions and to the changing urban living conditions of whole sections of the population, this fact remains.

2. For some years now the theme of urban requalification (in the broadest sense of the term: quality, revitalisation) has been a major concern of governments and administrations. The mood is unanimous. Everyone agrees on the need for requalification, even in the private sector. While this can be viewed positively, it should at the same time put us on our guard. The urban question is a highly complex and delicate one. Requalifying also means giving new value to something: it is thus clear that urban requalification policies (and more specifically the renewal of buildings) increase the value of property, and that all investment must be remunerated. But higher prices automatically imply selection of users. So urban requalification is not a "neutral policy". Experience tells us that all renewal policies "project" the dichotomies caused by the economic process territorially, physically and spatially. Urban requalification policy that involves renovating certain areas for particular social groups renders the rest of the urban reality even more "peripheral" (the typical American model). This leads to two different, but complementary, types of urban renewal policies: those affecting central

areas, and those concerning the peripheral areas. On the surface we appear to tackle both, but in actual fact the philosophy behind the policies is based on total separation.

3. At the beginning of the 1980's several European countries initiated some major urban policies.

France and Holland explicitly adopted national urban requalification policies aimed particularly at peripheral areas, in response to the demand for housing for under-privileged population groups. These were, basically, social policies. In France this came about quite suddenly, while in Holland it was a logical outcome of traditional planning policy. The line taken is that of "integrated policies" and local administrations play an important role in the implementation of the national policies.

England explicitly implemented urban requalification policies at the national level; they aimed at economically revitalizing the city and hoped to provide solutions to the housing problems in tune with market logic. There is a tendency to cold shoulder local administrations, and a trend towards centralization and privatization. Reformist or progressive municipalities have less scope for policies that run against the national trend.

In the 1980's Italy and Spain developed housing programmes at the national level based essentially on the building of new dwellings (the development of new public areas). In these two countries the more elaborate schemes to requalify peripheral areas stem from autonomous local initiatives or special central government programmes aimed at a few selected cities.

Germany, on the contrary, placed local and regional administrations in charge of following through building requalification and town planning schemes initiated during the 1970's under the aegis of the central government. Here, however, the debate still seems to be centred on building and town planning themes rather than social ones. In any event Germany's situation is a special one in the light of recents events: problems which seemed well on their way to being resolved (housing, for example) re-emerged with unforeseen magnitude, and new tensions arose from the reunification and the new migratory movements.

All these policies appear to have in common the fact that they were adopted in situations born from the general economic crisis, and particularly the slow-down in the building market. In all these countries, with the exception of England, the economic recovery and the revival of the building and real estate market in the 1980's have added a new dimension to existing urban policies, changing their meaning or at the very least their impact. In a situation of stagnation they had a quantitative meaning and impact; in a thriving real estate market they have come to appear more "sectoral" and "marginal", with a stronger experimental aspect and less scope for producing a cascade effect.

4. The economic expansion was immediately accompanied by an increase in public and private investment in the building sector. This new momentum in the building sector was based on real productive activity as well as on high hopes of further rapid and sustained developments fueled by the large number of "major construction projects" announced by public and private operators in many large cities.

So a new cycle of construction has begun, characterized first by the production of space for tertiary activities, and secondly by the conversion of certain existing buildings for the tertiary sector. The demand from this sector has pushed real estate prices, dragging housing prices in their wake, this trend being reinforced by the demand from population groups with increased spending power searching for housing to match their new social status. Higher incomes have increased mobility within the existing real estate market. In particular, certain income groups who have been able to leave the public housing sector have come onto the open market. At the same time rehabilitation operations on existing housing, and the general tendency towards complete or partial liberalization of the rented property market have also contributed to the general climate of enthusiasm and the new "high mobility" in the sector. Housing rehabilitation schemes are thus developing under the impetus of both public policies and private investment, alongside urban requalification schemes of a more general nature (services, parks, parking, etc.). After years of "deprivation" and "social promiscuity" we are now entering a phase of neo-consumerism where status and differentiation are sought. In this context of rising income people have sought more than ever to match their housing to their level of income (size and location); at the same time increasing numbers of families have wanted to buy a house, very often the one that they already lived in. The forces within the existing housing market help to a certain extent to explain the changes in progress in the functional, spatial and social organization of large built-up areas: the tendency for city centres to be overtaken by big business and expensive housing has been accompanied by internal migratory movements within metropolitan areas, from the centre to the outlying districts, covering the second and third belt with new peripheries (housing estates, new towns, etc.) The general urban requalification process under way in all large cities (with various major public and private projects affecting housing, offices, leisure, shopping centres, accessibility, green spaces, old and deserted zones) has undoubtedly contributed greatly to the new momentum in the building market.

In every country there seems to have been very little coherence between the initial schemes to upgrade peripheral areas and subsequent policies designed to revitalize the economy. The latter are intrinsically linked with private investment contributing to a dynamic real estate market; the former have become even fewer and more isolated in the new context. Perhaps the housing problems brought about by the new real estate boom (with concomitant social mobility patterns), are more than the initial peripheral development schemes had attempted to solve. In conclusion, therefore, the combined effects on housing conditions of public and private policies appear to outweigh the housing problems resolved by the public policies designed to upgrade peripheral areas.

5. We are obviously in the presence of two conflicting urban policies. The first, *implemented at the beginning of the 1980's*, is a public policy to requalify peripheral areas. It aims at "integration", having recognized that the problem of deterioration of peripheral areas is not simply limited to housing, building or even town planning; it is a socio-economic phenomenon.

It calls for a serious attempt to tackle traditional questions and issues, such as the lack of co-ordination between ministries, the bureaucratic barriers to communication and so on; problems which concern relations between the different parts of the central apparatus as well as between the centre and the periphery.

The second urban policy, more typical of the second half of the 1980's, consists in the implementation of large and small projects considered useful to the modernization and economic revitalisation of the city, helping it attract new wealth-generating economic activities and professional people. This policy purports to target the whole city and to revive it in the urban hierarchy. It has become the more prominent of the two as a political priority, not only in terms of magnitude and effort, but above all because it has set the private sector in motion. The probable result is that public policies have soon to be converted into assistance-type policies. I purposely use the word 'assistance' to highlight the fact that, although they may appear more sophisticated, their real purpose is to iron out imbalances, to keep everything running smoothly and to protect the image of the city. In other words, recent public policies to revive the city contribute to increasing the demand for other policies to help smooth out the conflicts they generate.

6. The time has now come to make some real distinctions between those administrations which are democratic and progressive and whose which are not. First of all, there are two sides to the housing question today: one is supply to cater for new, specific types of demand, the other is the improvement of the housing conditions of large sections of the population who already have a home. A general programme for the market as a whole is needed, a programme that is not limited to new demand alone, for this would simply amount to developing new public housing in new peripheral sites.

A united urban policy also appears necessary to solving the housing problems of the least privileged population groups. We need to launch again the concept of "social integration", more than that of "solidarity", a vague and ambiguous term. Given that the demand for cheap additional housing is on a lesser scale that in previous decades (confirming the fact that while quantity still counts, the problem of housing today should be tackled in terms of quality first and foremost), social integration can contribute to the implementation of urban requalification policies.

Thirdly, the level of intervention or of organization and management of the general project must be the metropolitan level, a commitment from which there is no escape.

More planning is needed and hence a general project at the metropolitan level which combines the overall requalification of the city, economic and social revival and the requalification of peripheral areas. This is what "integration" really means: integration of the two public policies, integration of the different levels of the public administration and integration of the private and public sectors in dealing with the whole gamut of problems and projects.