

Chapter 4

On Strategic Planning and Associated Issues

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4.1 Preamble

Several authors have remarked that the propensity – as we may call it – of local authorities to rely on ‘strategic planning’ originates from the interplay of various factors perceived as having a negative impact on governance capabilities.

The first factor is the speed of changes and their alleged complexity; the two aspects seem to be impossible to control (Bertuglia, Rota, & Staricco, 2004), especially by a public system more deficient than expert, better capable of administering than governing. The second factor is the budget-cutting trend in the public sector and the ensuing need for public/private partnerships to implement significant urban and territorial transformation schemes. The third factor is the ever-growing citizens’ distrust of public institutions (the debate on the crisis of politics and the institutions is as endless as it is inconclusive). This attitude leads, on the one hand, to a swing to ‘market’ actions and, on the other, to the emergence of demand, often indeterminate, for public participation.

The right tool for unravelling these tangled rather than interwoven issues seemed to be *strategic planning*¹ seen as a kind of ‘magic wand’. The schemes implemented in Italy and in the rest of Europe are well-articulated and differentiated, but often providing poor interpretations of this tool. These experiences are reported and critically analysed by an extensive body of literature (some of the most exhaustive analyses being those by Gibelli, 1996, 2003, 2007).²

One point often overlooked by discourse on ‘strategic planning’ should be highlighted from the start and will be expanded on later in this chapter: a strategy (and hence a strategic plan) can only be justified by a situation of conflict. *Urban and territorial changes* constitute a locus of conflicts in which ‘contenders’, using their force and attempting to neutralise that of their opponents, try to impose their own objectives (interests). Nevertheless, many ‘strategic plans’ fail to consider this state of things and are based on the assumption of ‘collaboration’ (to be achieved through

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negotiation). More precisely, the most widely used term is not ‘collaboration’ but ‘sharing’: this is an important distinction but the two issues are closely inter-linked, without one the other cannot exist. The choice of whether to refer to a situation of conflict or one of collaboration (sharing) is clearly not just a matter of terminology; if it were, it would be linguistically relevant but indifferent as to substance. On the contrary, this choice concerns the interpretation of relationships within society in general and the local community in particular.

We should point out that placing the focus on sharing leaves out partiality: those interests that are not shared by all are left out or, alternatively, the aims of the plan are strictly based on the fact that all the stakeholders (and we know how problematic the definition of ‘all the stakeholders’ is) share its objectives and tools, thus reversing the method of formulating the objectives themselves. Indeed, the fact that shared ‘strategic plans’ are simpler to implement lies not perhaps in the rightness of their objectives but rather in the coincidence of interests. ‘Implementability’, while it should certainly not be underestimated, cannot be taken as the sole value; the formulation of sound objectives, interpreting the needs of the whole area and responding to common interest, is not necessarily tantamount to ‘not’ doing. This is, we might say, a strategic issue.

In the remarks that follow I will argue that, as a consequence of the above, *public governance of urban and territorial change* to achieve an adequate level of effectiveness must draw up a strategy (since it addresses a situation of conflict) which attempts to:

- respond to future uncertainty by making a reasonable medium-term proposal;
- combat public distrust of government initiatives by providing a range of real participation processes, and, especially, transparent objectives and the means to implement them, through ongoing, comprehensive dissemination of information;
- raise awareness of future opportunities for economic, social, technological and cultural development;
- incorporate (some), private interests in general public interest planning.

Whether this strategy will lead to some form of ‘strategic planning’ is less important than the general goal the public administration must set for itself: the governance of change. Indeed, I will argue that the focus should not be on the tool, or one of its many applications, but rather on the intended objectives. In other words – and perhaps provocatively – I will argue that it is not the strategic plan which determines the medium-term objectives of a community, but rather the strategic plan can be the tool for achieving pre-defined objectives. Obviously, talking about ‘objectives’ opens a wide range of questions: their formulation, definition, implementation, monitoring and so on. These issues are discussed further in this chapter, although not as exhaustively as they deserve.

The basic intention is to address the theme of the *strategic plan* by focusing on the objectives and not on the tools, on common rather than partial interests and on a general interest seen not as the sum of agreements and common needs but as

responses to the demands emerging in a specific situation. Perhaps this approach is not consistent with strategic planning, but the interest in ‘how’ seems to me to be of secondary importance with respect to ‘why’.

4.2 An Economic or a Territorial Strategy?

The *strategic plan* might appear to be largely an economic programming tool; its corporate origin can, no doubt, support this impression. But *spatial strategic planning* is a specific territorial planning tool (Gibelli, 2007) introduced in zoning and land use planning legislation by many European countries.

This fact, however, does not dispel the doubt, because no *territorial strategy* can be purely ‘territorial’, just as no economic strategy (e.g., for economic development) can fail to take territorial issues into account. Strategy involves not only an objective to be achieved but also expected overall effects: indeed, these expected effects are what justify the pursuit of a specific set of objectives. In other words, an objective has value not only in itself but also because of the expected results it produces (just as the possible occurrence of unexpected or perverse effects requires constant monitoring and flexibility in the tools employed).

Governance of territorial and urban changes, when not intended as mere ‘administration’, that is, the recording of current trends, but rather as a *strategic* type of governance that wishes to bend the trends of a given context in a precise direction to achieve specific objectives, must include economic, social, cultural and territorial contents. Hence, the crux of the matter is not whether the ‘plan’ should have mainly economic or territorial contents, but rather whether its strategic impact can be imputed to the action. It is from this starting point that it will be possible, from time to time and in accordance with the specific conditions of place and time, to identify that blend of economic, social, cultural, infrastructural and landscape content, locational and territorial in the broad sense, suitable for achieving the ‘desired’ scenario which the public administration has envisaged and adopted as a medium-term goal through stakeholder participation and empowerment processes.

4.3 The ‘Appropriate’ Size and Possible ‘Contents’

As a consequence of both the far-reaching changes which have occurred in organisation of the territory (Indovina, 2003, 2005), increasingly tending towards the structuring of a metropolitan space (‘the metropolitan archipelago’), and of the need for a ‘critical mass’ (both quantitatively and qualitatively) for drawing up a medium-term project, strategic design should as a rule cover a ‘large’ geographical area. This level offers the greatest variety of social players, economic activities, opportunities, resources, demands and needs, and above all, includes the internal and external relationships needed to determine greater quality and greater opportunities. If it were true that not all recent development is urban in the traditional sense,

but has metropolitan scope, it would be essential to work at the large area level, whose size depends on the specific relationships existing in such an area. It is at this level that we can identify specific development trends, the positioning of social players, the resources available and the inevitable compromises in organisation of space. Only from this starting point can an alternative path of territorial development and organisation be traced.

Reference to the large area does not only take into account the effective *size* (mass), for positioning of the area in the international context, but may also offer efficient levels of *integration*, facilitating relationships both within the area and between the area itself and the exterior. Thus *local resources and potential can be enhanced* in a framework of internal relationships; *efficient and effective organisation of the territory* can be promoted and implemented (appropriate soil uses, environmental protection, reduction of pollution and congestion, sustainable use of resources, etc.); and all fundamental issues and essential requirements for improving quality of public life (and development) can be incorporated (Donolo, 2007).

This strategic line should comprise a coherent set of contents/objectives, including the following basic ones, provided here only as an example:

- *equity*: counteracting both the existing or future imbalances between the various zones in the area (territorial justice), and social differentiations which can be mitigated through appropriate provision of welfare services and redistribution of resources;
- *densification*: appropriate active (infrastructure) and passive tools (constraints, limits, etc.) are needed to reduce land degradation processes and abnormal soil consumption;
- *control of physical and environmental resources*: seen as the rational use of resources, including energy planning, water consumption and so on;
- *local development*: social capital and local resources may, if recognised, become opportunities for local development projects;
- *spread of innovation*: favouring the creation of facilities and connections between scientific research and the business world, favouring technology transfer and business and social spin-offs;
- *improved awareness and education*: local development, the spread of innovation, but also the sustainable use of resources which requires improved cultural awareness and education of individuals and higher quality vocational training at all levels;
- *infrastructure*: appropriate organisation of the territory and achievement of the aforesaid objectives require a widespread, well-articulated infrastructure network which, however, must not be wasteful of resources and territory;
- *solution of local conflicts*: situations of conflict between *local public interest* and a *higher-level public interest* (Indovina, 2007) can be better managed by regional planning which can bring into play a range of methods for achieving the general interests of the whole area.

The combination of the above contents/objectives, or the degree of importance attributed to each element with respect to the others, will depend on the context, area prospects, current trends and the general goals pursued.

4.4 Conflicts and Strategy

The social, individual and institutional players acting and operating in a given area have a *common interest*, on the one hand, in ensuring that the territory functions to the best of its capabilities and possibilities but, on the other, in pursuing their specific objectives they often oppose this common interest and the interests of the other players.

It is not so much a case of schizophrenic behaviour, as of a condition that emerges during the implementation process. Additionally, the common interest presents different facets according to the social conditions of each player. Basically, the pursuit of a common interest is both a necessity and an obstacle, which the players, on the one hand, constantly call for and on the other constantly attempt to violate.

The dynamics of any area are determined by 'social practices' (Indovina, 1997), that is, by the actions taken by single or associated individuals to achieve their aims. These social practices determine the dynamics and innovation of a specific area. However, such practices are often in contrast with one another; they affirm individual and partial (hence non-shared) interests; they generate geographical and social imbalances; they lead to unsound territorial organisation and they produce obstacles to development. In short, these practices contain both positive and negative elements: they tend to 'bend' any regulatory framework through a process of self-organisation, they make the 'strongest' to emerge as the winner in every contrast or conflict and they undermine equity by privileging a sort of social Darwinism. Social practices tend to produce significant negative externalities but at the same time, they produce dynamism and innovation.

Needless to say, organisation of the city cannot consist of the sum total of social practices; it is a collective 'product' in the sense that it must provide guarantees for all stakeholders. It must satisfy expectations of equity, improve efficiency and effectiveness of organisations and contribute to strengthening social relationships, integration, dialogue, equal opportunities and development.

One might correctly argue that the 'conditions' which the city should guarantee pertain to *urban ideology*, because in actual fact the city (which is the spatial projection of social structure) cannot be equitable organised and is strongly marked by social discrimination (which manifests itself in the social organisation of space). The reality of the city, as generated by socio-economic and market mechanisms, collides with urban ideology.³ While the real city may be considered a 'deviation' from the role society (ideologically) assigns to it, we must also be aware of the fact that urban ideology creates demands and expectations among social groups and citizens. Not surprisingly, all public schemes launched in and for the city declare

the aim of affirming those elements of urban condition which we may classify as ideological. However, these elements can be achieved only partially, because of the contrast between social practices and their partiality and, above all, because of the emergence of conflicts.

We may summarise the above argument as follows:

- the collective body of individuals and institutions recognises the need to affirm a *common interest*, a form of city and territorial organisation guaranteeing (this) common or general interest, in order to facilitate achievement of the objectives of individual players;
- in striving to achieve their aims, individual players seek to bend the constraints, the rules and the very organisation which guarantees common or general interest. They also enter into competition with the other stakeholders and leverage on their power to meet their ends;
- the role of ‘guardian’ of public interest is assigned to the public institutions. Public institutions are provided with their own form of ‘power’;
- the power of the public institutions, used for affirming common and general interest, is not opposed by a private interest but rather by a number of diverse private interests. Basically, the public/private dichotomy oversimplifies a far more complex reality.

It is only in this sphere of conflicts, of opposing forces, of new and dissolved alliances, that strategy may come into play (Cecchini & Indovina, 1992) even in a reality that presents both conflicting and collaborative relationships,⁴ a combination which constitutes a factor of dynamism and transformation of social organisation (Busino, 1978).

In this context, strategic thinking means the science of action: it contemplates conflict and the use of force, but it does not rule out collaboration.⁵ In the sense considered here, which is not military, strategy targets the achievement of an objective which may not be shared by some social groups and is therefore opposed by them. Hence the need to draw up a strategy emerges.

4.5 Before Strategy: Defining the Objective

The organisation of space is not an autonomous form of the configuration of reality, but rather constitutes a *projection* of social organisation in space. The structures (social relations of production), which mark societies over time give shape to a specific spatial organisation, but this takes place in a ‘built’ territory (history, fixed social capital, prior forms of urbanisation, etc.), which dialectically represents an element of *resistance* to change of the territory, but is also the basis for such change. Any specific spatial configuration, as observed at a given point in time, incorporates the tensions, social and cultural change, innovations (technological and organisational), the temper and the deep and surface movements of the resident community, and it reveals how all these factors have shaped the territory.

This awareness does not imply powerlessness of collective and public action, but makes explicit the material which such action must deal with. The urban condition, whatever this may mean, is a collective construction comprising: the values of those living in a community, social and cultural relations; attempts to build a desired future; as well as handling of contradictions and contrasts, rather than the sum of particular interests. While social practices oppose the collective dimension to enhance particular interests, *governance* consists of the *ongoing reconstruction* of the collective dimension.

However, this is not *conservative* reconstruction but rather – taking into account the innovations and dynamisms induced by social practices – the search for higher-level balance that meets the expectations and hopes of social players. In other words, the aim is to define a desirable future. It is in the definition of this future that the *intentionality* of the ‘policy’ comes into play; a future which bends the reality of a given situation, which also modifies its trends, in order to achieve desirable targets. The construction of this future is a public function, therefore in order to avoid self-referentiality, lack of realism and unsoundness, it must be based on *knowledge, science and participation*. This means obtaining comprehensive knowledge on the changes under way, the processes these changes have induced or may induce, trends and the inter-dependencies between the reality concerned and ‘external’ dynamics (regional, national or international). A knowledge that instead of simply outlining the ‘state of facts’ seeks to identify change trends (in economic, territorial, social and cultural configuration). A number of scientific and methodological tools make it possible, on the basis of this knowledge, to design, what we might call, the *probable future*. The tools available enable us to make not just a simple future projection of quantifiable trends, but also to assess qualitative elements, highlight relationships between the various trends, identify points of friction and so on. In the absence of actions aimed at modifying current trends and processes, the *probable future* basically outlines the likely future conditions (economic, social, cultural and territorial), of liveability and the quality of life of that community.

In contrast to this *probable future* stands a *possible future*, an objective aimed at change (now for the future), which seems more desirable than mere waiting for the realisation of trends. This of course raises the issue of how this image of the future should be built.⁶

A fundamental role is played by *public intentionality*, that is, by the government’s interpretation of the possible future and of the prospects which seem to hold more promise for society than the realisation of the existing trends (not only is this activity legitimate, it is a prime responsibility and is indeed what is expected of the elected leaders).

A key element required to dispel any doubt of self-referentiality and a collective foundation for this future scenario is *participation*, which can play a fundamental role in both the proposal and verification stages. Within this framework ‘conflicts’ should be considered as the expression of dissatisfaction and demands. Widespread participation in the overall scenario building should be ensured; the social partners should have their say – in short, the focus should be on the greatest possible degree of participation and contribution.

An important condition of the participation process is that the debate on the possible future should, as far as possible, be free from the ‘particular’ interests of the various stakeholders. Citizens, social partners, organisations and so on should be called upon to discuss, contribute to and define an imagined future as a better and more desirable scenario.

While participation can occur spontaneously (e.g., through conflict), it must also be organised. Although organised participation loses the element of spontaneity (the direct expression of dissatisfaction), it does constitute a formidable *listening* tool. This process should be interactive, and here a fundamental role is played by the public authority’s ‘team’ which has the task of: (1) recording and re-formulating the elements arising from policy planning and the participation process, (2) identifying the positive and negative elements of current trends and (3) highlighting any contradictions which might emerge from the diverse demands and the various alternative prospects. This interactive work leads to the identification of some ‘cornerstones’, that is, general policy objectives; they include sustainability (Ferlaino, 2005), social equity (Fregolent & Indovina, 2002), the achievement of better and more widespread knowledge, development and so on. The choice of these cornerstones is among the most significant contributions of policy-makers.

Depending on the context, such general goals may differ and may be subjected to debate (in this case, they should be based on strong grounds and shared by the majority of society). Specific models and techniques have been developed to improve participation (Rizzi, 2004).

When building participation, an important aspect is the attitude of policy-makers; it would be a serious mistake – to be carefully avoided – to consider participation as a tool for building ‘political consensus’. Although such an objective is explicitly excluded from desired outcomes, in actual fact the search for political consensus is an implicit objective.⁷ What needs to be sought with great care is *support for a project of change and its joint design*, which is the aim of participation in this context. Different conditions and experiences, various future expectations, the ‘dreams’ (*I have a dream*), compared and assessed against current trends, possibilities and available resources, contribute to generating a process through which the whole community, via the ‘common learning’ process, builds a shared future scenario (i.e., shared by the majority of the community).

The process of defining the *possible* (and hoped for) *future*, relatively widely shared, will be marked by *realism* (in the sense that it takes into account the real possibilities of the context) and *innovation* (insofar as it corrects current trends). It will define a development pathway which, on the one hand, targets some shared political objectives (sustainability, equity, etc.), and, on the other, attempts to govern the existing trends to achieve an improved situation. Lastly, this process will be characterised by consensus (insofar as it is shared), and by *opportunity* because it creates favourable conditions for each individual to achieve his or her specific objectives in the framework of a common project.

By comparing the *probable future* with the *possible future*, we can gauge the gap between the two, and hence measure the ‘effort’ needed to move from the

former to the latter. Here ‘effort’ means many things – not just financial resources but also political resources, the capacity of mobilising public opinion, organisational resources and so on. This comparison also outlines the scope of governmental action, which will require an appropriate *strategy* to achieve the overall scheme.

4.6 Strategy and Stratagem

At this point it becomes imperative for the public administration to formulate a strategy for the drafting of a *strategic plan* – not a plan defining objectives but rather a plan identifying *players, forces, interests, policies and actions* – to set in motion the realisation of the *possible future*. Admittedly, the approach I propose in this chapter departs from the standard practice (and perhaps also from the theory) of strategic planning as applied in many contexts. However, the poor outcome of many strategic plans and the partial success of others, often in contrast with an overall development vision, seem to warrant the proposing of different approaches.

The public authority cannot act alone in designing a *possible future*, due to chronic lack of financial resources and due to the fact that the broad nature of the objectives requires involvement and commitment of other public and private parties. However, this in no way diminishes its role but rather increases its governance responsibility and orients its action.

The contribution of the other players should not be limited to the executive phase but should also include analysis of issues, definition of the plan and identification of the appropriate tools, policies and actions. With a positive combination of government and governance.

This approach is based on the following requirements:

- the public authority must be the *director* of the overall plan, acting as guarantor of its soundness and credibility;
- in construction of the *strategic plan* each player is assigned specific tasks and takes on specific commitments;
- the private players involved, while pursuing their own objectives, also *contribute to the achievement of general objectives*, since their own specific objectives fall within the general plan;
- the strategic plan arises from a process of governance which *must be devoid of any under-the-counter deals*.

I argue that the public administration, as a depository of the objectives identified by consensus, is the party which defines the strategy, by means of: (1) joint and separate concertation and negotiation forums or other tools and (2) setting up the time milestones, subjects and concrete initiatives, thus giving life to the intended future. This however, does not mean *imposition* on the part of policy-makers, on the contrary, discussion may in many aspects be open, but with clear objectives. Indeed, any self-referentiality on the part of policy-makers will have been dispelled by the prior process of participation allowing definition of the *possible future*.

Thus, the public administration should draw up its own *strategy* while preparing a *strategic plan*. In this process, we cannot simply make a distinction between public and private; indeed, the situation is much more complex, not only due to the different objectives pursued by the various ‘private’ players, but also because only the interests of some of these private players will be fully met by the envisaged future, while others will be wholly or partly sacrificed. Furthermore, other public institutions may have objectives in partial contradiction with those of the public administration promoting the plan.

Hence the theme is to construct a *strategy* leading to the full definition of a *strategic plan* which clearly identifies actions, timelines and players. This is certainly not a simple operation, and the task is often aggravated by a shortfall in the required professional skills in the public administration.

The structure of this strategy should also include specific stratagems to achieve compromises, actions, breakthroughs and so on. A useful example is the first of the 36 Chinese stratagems *the most skilled in warfare directs his opponent, but never permits his opponent to direct him* (Casacchia, 1990), which, in our case, applies to the directing role to be played by the public administration.

Of course, in this case the term ‘war’ is replaced by *negotiation* which also has strategic rules (Schelling, 1960), as summarised hereunder:

- do not focus on negotiation themes whose results can be profitable for all parties
 - take them for granted. Do not play down the difficulty of finding agreement on these themes, but assume that the opposing party too is well aware of the situation;
- focus the greatest attention on agreements characterised by dissymmetry, that is, whose outcome is better for one of the parties than for the other. Bear in mind, however, that this situation is determined by the fact that any agreement is better than no agreement at all. An excessively broad range of possibilities generates instability which may, in turn, lead to failure to reach an agreement. An agreement may be reached through ‘voluntary sacrifice of the freedom of choice’, that is, imposing constraints on oneself (the public administration in this case) can reduce the adversary’s freedom of choice;
- when the result depends on the development of the negotiation, it can be useful to clearly explain specific objectives (through ‘public statements’), to make it quite clear which are not open to compromise;
- the distribution of costs and benefits should be clearly identified. Clarity on this point facilitates balanced choices;
- the ‘threat’ constitutes an important tool – a party threatens to do something it actually has no interest in doing since it would be damaging to both parties. This is a tool to be used with caution, indeed a threat is made only if one is convinced that it will produce the desired results; basically, it is the threat itself which achieves the aim, not its fulfilment;
- the ‘promise’ is on the other hand a positive tool, particularly when the final action is outside the control of one of the two contenders.

The approach proposed in this section can be summarised as follows:

- the public administration (policy-maker) is a *guarantor* of a project for the future;
- the achievement of this vision is facilitated by the drawing up of a *strategic plan*;
- the public administration defines a *strategy* for drafting the strategic plan.

This might appear as a somewhat ‘Baroque’ construction and, as already said, as a variation on the more consolidated model of strategic planning. Indeed, I would argue that the main purpose of the strategic plan is to identify not general objectives but rather methods (strategic methods) to achieve interventions, actions and policies able to shape and realise pre-defined objectives through a process that combines *political intentionality, knowledge of the situation and participation*. This approach, as already stated, departs from more traditional forms of strategic planning which – bluntly stated – tend to diminish the role of the public authority and favour the objectives of the stronger players (perhaps also because their objectives are easier to achieve). The point made in this chapter is that the traditional approach should be reversed by refocusing on the role of public authorities in the organisation of cities and territories and in the quality of life of their communities.

Notes

1. On the ‘production’ of strategic plans see Spaziante and Pugliese (2003) and Martinelli (2005).
2. See also Savino (2003), who remarks on strategic planning as part of his analysis of local area governance.
3. This theme was explored in depth in the 1960s. See the classic Castell (1974) and Bolognini (1981).
4. We can confidently reject the *cliché* that all relationships within society are of an antagonistic nature, and also the opposite contention that all relationships are collaborative, and that any exceptions to this rule are simply anomalies to be eradicated. Indeed, not only are both types of relationship found in society, but also conflicting relationships may not always be removed by employing force (Cecchini & Indovina, 1989).
5. For an analysis of collaboration, see Gambetta (1989); for collaboration within a situation of conflict see Rapoport (1960) and Cecchini (1989).
6. We could also consider three futures, that is, probable, desirable and possible, where the latter is a ‘realistic’ version of the desirable. However, this subdivision does not seem to provide significant advantages.
7. It is not unusual, for instance, for the electoral defeat of a party which promoted and supported a participation process to appear as being incomprehensible. This bafflement is summarised by the question: “How could this happen? We fostered citizens’ participation to give them a say in decision-making, and yet they voted against us!”.

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