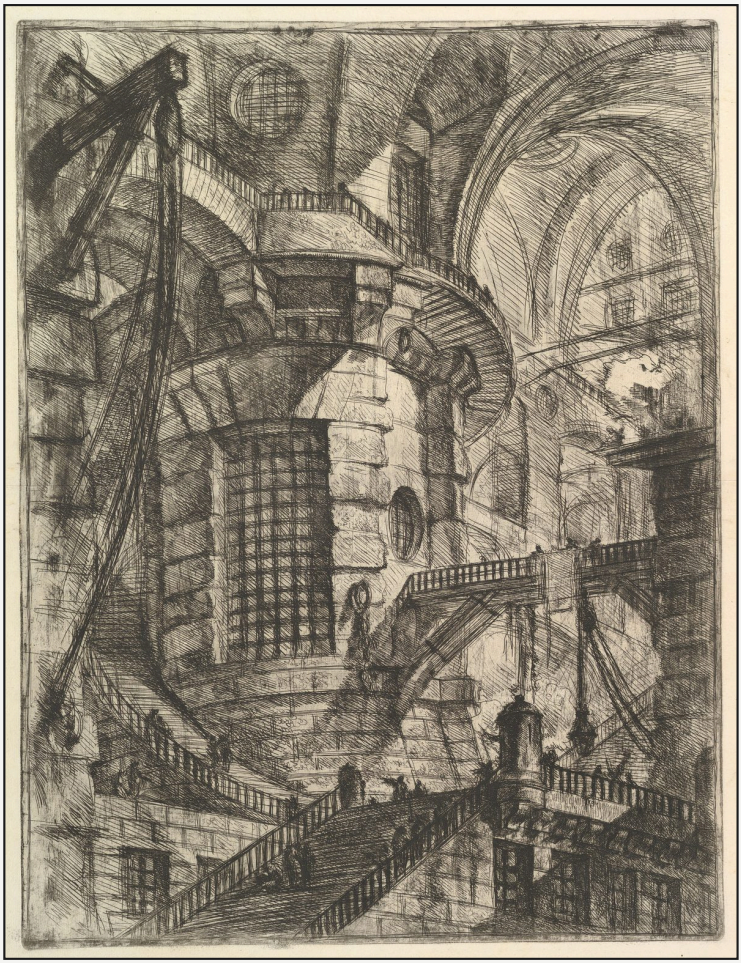
ROBERTO DERIU

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URBAN PLANNING DOESN'T EXIST

An Essay on Territorial Governance



MMXXVI

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Urban Planning Doesn’t Exist

An Essay on Territorial Governance

Roberto Deriu

Uncorrected digital proof supplied for review purposes.
English edition, 133 pages, 5 × 8 in.
Paperback and Kindle edition, Amazon.

Original edition: *L’urbanistica non esiste. Saggio sul governo del territorio*, 2026.

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Urban Planning Doesn't Exist — An Essay on Territorial Governance
Original title: *L'urbanistica non esiste. Saggio sul governo del territorio*
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First English edition, 2026.

Contents

Preface 4
1. The Ancient Order: When the City Was Cosmology 10
2. The City as Police, as Statistics, as Art 21
3. The Corrective Utopia: Fleeing the Metropolis to Save It 31
4. The Short Century of the Total Plan 40
5. The Revolt of the Sidewalk 53
6. The Contemporary Dissolution 65
7. The Laws We Have, the Territory We Do Not Govern 78
8. What Remains, If Urban Planning Does Not Exist. The Final Proposal 94
Appendix. Endemic Laws: The Case of Sardinia 107
Annotated Bibliography 124
Index of Names 131

Preface

I begin with the thesis, so that the reader may know at once where I am headed and may, if so inclined, close the book at the first page. Urban planning does not exist. I have been saying it for more than ten years, in every venue where I have had occasion to speak of it, and every time I meet with the same reaction: a half smile, as if before a successful provocation. It is not a provocation. It is a statement of fact. This essay exists to explain it.

The half smile deserves a couple of lines, because it is instructive. In the Chamber it comes quickly: the sentence is taken for a debating paradox, a rhetorical move, and the discussion passes on. At conferences it is slower: the technicians wait for the explanation, ready to defend the discipline, and realize along the way that they are not my target. Outside — with mayors, with administrators, with those who sign the acts — the smile changes nature: it becomes a nod of understanding. Whoever governs a territory grasps the sentence instantly, because they live it every day in offices and meetings. It was from that silent understanding, more than from the objections, that I realized it was worth making a book of it. These pages are written also for those who smile in that way: to set down in writing what that nod takes as understood.

The sentence means three things, and none of the three is a catchphrase. The first: urban planning does not exist as an autonomous science. There is no neutral

technical knowledge that draws the city from above and hands it over to its inhabitants. Every planning choice — where to build, how much, for whom — depends on the economy, on demography, on politics. The discipline arrives afterward and gives form to decisions matured elsewhere. It is not a failing of the technicians, many of whom are the first to know it: it is the nature of the subject. Urban planning deals with what a society does with its own space, and what a society does with its own space is decided outside the planning offices. Anyone who has sat on a planning committee knows it: the pencil follows the balance of power; it does not precede it.

The second: urban planning does not exist as effective power. Plans always arrive afterward. They ratify what has already happened or chase what is happening. A *master plan* can prohibit, constrain, zone; but it imposes no direction on society if the social and political agreement that sustains it is missing. Where that agreement exists, the plan works. Where it does not, the plan remains paper — registered, published, even elegant, but paper. And paper, in the governance of territory, has a singular property: the more it demands, the less it obtains. A prohibition without consent does not stop things; it produces requests for derogation, delays, litigation. I observed it for years, as an administrator, always with the same outcome.

The third, which follows from the first two: only bargaining exists. Implementation plans, program agreements ("accordi di programma"), development agreements ("convenzioni"). The real governance of territory is the one negotiated case by case, table by

table, with first and last names. What exists is planning politics — that is, negotiation — not urban planning. This is the heart of the book. And to negotiate does not mean to yield: it means recognizing that the other's interest exists, and that ignoring it costs more than reconciling it. Those who know me will recognize here the method I have always practiced: first the interests, then the rule that holds them together.

I do not speak as an observer. I was a member of the city government in Nuoro from 2000 to 2005 and president of the Province of Nuoro from 2005 to 2014; I chaired the Union of Sardinian Provinces; I sit in the Regional Council of Sardinia. I have spent years inside urban plans, constraints, advisory opinions. I have signed acts that were worth construction sites and acts that were worth decades of waiting. With time I learned to distinguish, almost at a glance, the act that would produce something from the act that would produce only other acts. The difference never lay in the technical quality of the document. It lay in what had happened around it: who had been heard, who had been persuaded, who had agreed to give something up. The thesis of this essay was born there, not in a book.

I do not remember a precise moment when I understood it: I remember a long series of moments. Every time a plan said one thing and the territory did another. Every time a plan amendment ("variante") arose not from a technical error but from a shift in interests. Every time the truly decisive instrument turned out to be a signature at the foot of a development agreement, after months of negotiation. The technician proposed; reality disposed; politics, when it was there,

recomposed. And when politics was not there, there was no one to recompose: the territory went ahead all the same, on its own, and the plan stood watching.

Those who have read my books will recognize the thread. *La democrazia rapita* is from 1998, *Scacco matto* from 2011: two stages of a single itinerary. With *Vincere in politica con la trattativa*, in 2024, that path took the name it deserved — negotiation, precisely. In that book I applied to politics the *principled negotiation* born at Harvard: focus on interests, not positions; invent many options before deciding; insist on objective criteria; separate the people from the problem. "Soft on the people, hard on the problem": I know no maxim better suited to a planning table, where the problem is a piece of territory and the people live on top of it.

Il principe della Repubblica, in 2026, continued that path: democracy as a method before it is a value, with its "pedantry" of procedures and minutes, which only in appearance is a defect. Of that book, here, I need above all one virtue: patience — because the territory has its own times, which rarely coincide with those of the people who administer it. And I need the Greek distinction between *Chronos* and *Kairos*, which I will take up at length when the moment comes to propose: for now, let the reader know only that the plan and negotiation do not inhabit the same time, and that many of the failures recounted in these pages are born there. This essay applies the same method to the governance of territory: not the ideal plan, but the agreement one manages to build.

One misunderstanding must be cleared up at once, because it is here that the half smile risks becoming a

misreading. The formula does not deny master plans, laws, planning *standards*, constraints. I am not asking to abolish anything. The formula states something different and more precise: that the discipline, by itself, does not govern. To deny that the plan governs alone is not to deny the plan; it is to restore it to its place. The plan is necessary as grammar is necessary to a language; but no one has ever spoken by consulting a grammar. Grammar describes, orders, corrects: the language is made by its speakers. Whoever confuses the instrument with governing mistakes the map for the journey.

This book, too, is a journey, and like every journey it has an order. It sets out from the ancient cities built on regular plans, when society was immobile enough for the design of the city to coincide with the city itself: there, and perhaps only there, urban planning truly existed. Then society begins to move — trade, migrations, industry — and the chase begins: urban police, statistics, utopia, the total plan. Ever more ambitious attempts to impose technique on life, and ever less successful. Each station of the journey traces the same arc from a different point: an instrument is born to govern change, change overtakes it, the instrument survives as procedure.

The journey continues through the twentieth century and arrives at today: the revolt of those who look at the city from the sidewalk and not from above, the contemporary dissolution of the discipline into a thousand partial practices. Finally it comes home: Italian legislation, which offers proof by the normative route — one derogation after another, one agreement after another — of what the rest of the book argues by

the historical route. I wanted the last word to belong to the norms, which I know by trade: if the thesis holds before the texts of the law, as well as before history, then it holds. And for the reader who wishes to see all the figures of this normative repertoire concentrated in a single territory, an appendix at the end of the book examines the case I know best — Sardinia, the island where I have practiced everything these pages describe.

And at the end of the journey there remains what was there at the beginning, finally recognized: politics that negotiates. It is not a surrender. It is the opposite of a surrender. Negotiation is the way a community decides about itself when no one can prevail alone — and in the governance of territory no one can prevail alone, ever. Negotiating costs more than prescribing: one must know the interests, listen to them, weigh them, reconcile them, and accept that the result will not resemble the initial design. But it is a cost the territory repays. Whoever promises the perfect plan is promising, in reality, to do without the others.

This is why the thesis is not against urban planning. It is against the illusion that urban planning can replace politics. Many urban planners have known it for a long time, and they say it in words more prudent than mine. I chose the blunt formula because prudence, on this point, seems to me to have exhausted its task. Urban planning does not exist. The territory, the interests, the people exist. And there exists — when we decide to exercise it — the politics that brings them to agreement.

1

The Ancient Order: When the City Was Cosmology

The objection always reaches me from the same direction: what about the ancients? Whoever hears me say that urban planning does not exist counters with the grid of the Greeks, the designed Piraeus, the ideal cities of the Renaissance — men who thought the city whole and traced it on the earth. I maintain the opposite of what the objection presumes. The ancient order does not refute the thesis: it founds it. Those designs were possible on one precise condition, which no one declared because to no one did it seem a condition — a society that does not move. If nothing changes, you can design everything once and for all. It is the only hypothesis in which total design works. And it is a hypothesis that history soon ceased to grant.

There is a rule I learned by administering, not by studying: an argument is measured against its worst case. If my thesis holds before Hippodamus, before Plato, before Vitruvius — before the men who seem to have refuted it centuries in advance — then it holds everywhere. That is why I do not begin with the contemporary city, where the thesis has an easy time of it, but with the world in which the city truly was designed before being inhabited. I want to look the contrary evidence in the face. And to show that, seen up close, it says something else: it says at what price total design was possible, and why no living society could pay

that price for long.

Hippodamus of Miletus, fifth century BC. He is the first to think that the grid can produce democracy. It is Aristotle who hands this down to us in the *Politics* — it was Hippodamus, son of Euryphon, a Milesian, who invented the division of cities, and it was he who divided the Piraeus. The report must be weighed. He invented the division: not the streets, not the houses — the division. Before him the city grew as an organism grows, by successive additions. After him there exists the idea that dividing the soil into equal parts is a political act: the grid as a profession of faith in the equality of citizens.

I pause on this point, because it is less obvious than it seems. The report does not come to us from him: it comes from Aristotle, a philosopher who reasoned about constitutions. And precisely this makes it precious: Aristotle does not record a building fact, he records a political fact. He does not say that Hippodamus traced streets straighter than the earlier ones. He says that he invented the division. Division is a juridical operation before it is a geometric one: it establishes that the soil belongs to the city and that the city may apportion it according to a rule. Who divides, decides. And whoever decides once and for all demands that the decision never again be called into question. The layout is the minutes of that decision, engraved in the earth so that no one may reopen them.

But the grid has a presupposition that no one states. It presupposes that the citizens are those citizens, in that number, with those rights. One block equal to another block makes sense if the men who inhabit them

remain equal to one another and equal to themselves. The grid does not produce democracy: it presumes it. And it presumes, above all, that the society designed stays still inside the design. The Piraeus works as long as the Piraeus is what Hippodamus had in mind. A port, however, is by definition the place where what was not foreseen arrives.

There is an irony in Aristotle's report: to the inventor of division fell the task of dividing, of all things, a port — the place that lives on what comes in, on goods and on men that no apportionment had reckoned with. Whoever administers knows this irony in more modest forms. Every general rule I have helped to write has been put to the test not by the cases foreseen, but by the one no one had imagined; and the quality of an administration is measured there, in how it treats the unforeseen, not in how it files away the foreseen. The grid does not know how to treat the unforeseen: it can ignore it or be overwhelmed by it. That is why it is not a power. It is a premise, and premises govern nothing.

Plato draws the extreme consequence. In the *Laws* he fixes the number: 5,040 citizens, because this number lends itself to all the divisions useful in war and in peace. No more and no fewer. The philosopher does not describe a city: he closes it. 5,040 is a number that divides well, and a society that divides well administers well. But a city that cannot grow is a city forbidden to live. Here lies the point: the closed number is the hidden condition of every plan. The perfect plan demands a demography that stands still. If the number moves, the design collapses.

Plato's frankness is worth noting. Where Hippodamus leaves the presupposition implied, the philosopher writes it down: for the design to hold, the number must be that one. Hippodamus designs and keeps silent; Plato designs and declares the clause. In this sense the *Laws* is the most honest text in the tradition: it puts in writing the condition that all the others take for granted. To fix the number of citizens is to govern everything that makes that number move — who is born, who leaves, who arrives. The perfect plan is not a chapter of politics: it is politics entire, employed to stop life so that the design will not shift.

Whoever has administered knows this. In the town hall of Nuoro first, then in the Province, I never governed a number that stood still. The population ages, emigrates, returns, moves from the historic center to the new subdivisions, and every movement reopens the accounts the plan had closed. Plato's dream — the number that does not change — is the secret dream of every planner. No one confesses it, because to confess it would mean admitting that the plan holds only if life stops.

The moving number is not a defect of the documents: it is the very matter of government. A plan sized to a population finds it already different the day it comes into force, because between the survey and the approval time passes, and in that time people do not wait. Schools sized to an age cohort that grows thinner, services designed for neighborhoods that empty while others fill: whoever administers spends more time correcting forecasts than executing them. The reason lies not in the people: it lies in the object. A population is not a datum,

it is a process. And on a process you do not design: you negotiate.

Vitruvius codifies the Roman method in *De architectura*: he prescribes founding cities with an eye to the salubrity of sites, the exposure to winds, the availability of water. And then the triad every student repeats: *firmitas, utilitas, venustas*. Solidity, utility, beauty. But the decisive word is none of the three: it is "to found." Foundation is the only moment in which the urban planner truly governs, because it is the only moment in which the city is not there. There are no owners to expropriate, no interests to compose, no habits to displace. There is a soil, a wind, a water. Technique suffices, because it does not yet have anyone before it.

This observation seems to me the heart of the chapter, and I develop it. In foundation, the relation between technique and politics is the reverse of everything that comes after. Before the inhabitants, every question has a technical answer: where the water runs, from where the wind strikes, which soil bears weight. They are questions the place answers, and the place does not negotiate: it is studied. After the inhabitants, the questions change nature. Whose soil is this. Who moves aside to let the road pass. Who pays, who yields, who obtains. They are questions the place no longer answers: men answer them, and men negotiate. Foundation is the only instant in which the territory has a single voice, that of the one who designs it. An instant, precisely. All the rest is chorus.

The day after the foundation another story begins. The inhabitants arrive, and with the inhabitants the

interests; with the interests, the conflicts; with the conflicts, the necessity of composing them. On this the treatise is silent, and not out of distraction: because at that point the discipline has already yielded to politics. One founds through design; one governs by law and by negotiation. The whole distinction lies here, and it is the same one I defend in this book.

Between Vitruvius and the treatise writers of the Renaissance runs more than a millennium, but the problem does not change: what changes is the fiction by which it is circumvented. The Romans circumvented it by actually founding — new cities on new soil, where the condition of the absent society was, for a moment, real. The humanists found almost no cities: they write. And by writing they construct with words the condition that history no longer grants. Each of them invents a different way of imagining motionless a society that motionless is not. I review them one by one, because each fiction reveals something.

Leon Battista Alberti, in the *De re aedificatoria* of 1452, overturns Vitruvius in a humanist key: "The city is like some large house, and the house is in turn like some small city." The sentence reveals more than it declares. The house is the place where a single master decides: if the city is a great house, then the city has a master who thinks it whole. The domestic analogy is the humanist way of imagining society immobile — an extended family, with an architect as head of the household. And the rest is told by his idea of the streets: the ornament of the city lies above all in the street well traced and well paved. The good city is the one where the layout precedes and disciplines the step of those who inhabit it.

The analogy of the house deserves a moment more, because it is the most seductive of the fictions. It has the air of common sense: who does not understand a house? But precisely here lies the deception. In a house, conflicts are resolved by authority: there is one who decides and one who complies, and the closed door does the rest. In a city, conflicts are resolved — when they are resolved — by composition: no one can close the door on the others, because the city is precisely the place where the doors all open onto the same street. To reduce the city to a house is to erase the trait that distinguishes it: the plurality of decision-makers. It is an elegant operation of thought. And it is, literally, the negation of politics.

Antonio Averlino, called Filarete, pushes the fiction all the way to pure form. In the *Trattato di architettura*, around 1464, he describes Sforzinda, the ideal star-shaped city: an eight-pointed star, two squares rotated one upon the other inside a circular moat. And in it he sets down his precept — to build with reason, order and measure — which presupposes a single subject: one who reasons, orders and measures for all. Sforzinda remained on paper. This is not an accident: it is the destiny of the genre. The ideal cities that were built can be counted on one's fingers; the ideal cities that were written fill libraries. The ideal city is a literary genre before it is a practice, and its building material is paper.

On the literary genre I want to be precise, because it is not a quip. A genre has its rules, and those of the ideal city are constant: a narrator who sees the city from above or from outside; inhabitants described as a rule in

the plural and almost never by name, because the name would introduce the individual and the individual introduces the exception; a pure geometric form, which no city grown over time has ever had. They are the rules of a world without counterparts. On paper the designer does not meet the owner who will not sell, the heir who divides, the neighbor who appeals. Paper is the perfect soil because it is the only one on which no one claims rights. Every ideal city is, first of all, an empty cadastre.

Thomas More, in the *Utopia* of 1516, binds together urban form and equality: "He that knows one of their towns knows them all—they are so like one another, except where the situation makes some difference." And so that equality may not be corrupted by time: "At every ten years' end they shift their houses by lots." The ten-year lottery is the most instructive device in the entire utopian genre, because it reveals the point: if houses are bought and sold, the market is born; if the market is born, difference is born; if difference is born, the equal design no longer holds. To save the form, the dynamic must be suppressed. Utopia is a society from which movement has been removed by law.

That lottery is the device to look at more closely. More does not limit himself to designing equality: he builds the mechanism that restores it, because he knows — and he is the most lucid of them all — that designed equality wears out. Time works against the form: whoever cares for a house improves it, whoever neglects it lets it go, and after ten years two equal houses are equal no longer. The lottery cancels the work of time and begins again. It is the clearest admission the genre has produced: the design does not maintain itself, it

must be defended by a periodic act of authority against the life that would erode it. Where Plato closes the number, More reshuffles the houses. Two roads to the same end: to prevent society from accumulating differences.

Andrea Palladio, in *The Four Books of Architecture* — printed in Venice in 1570 — closes the circle with the sobriety of the builder. In the first chapter of the first book he writes: "Three things in every building (as Vitruvius says) must be considered, without which no edifice will deserve to be praised: and these are utility, or convenience, perpetuity, and beauty." As Vitruvius says: the aside is in the original. The last of the treatise writers leans on the first, centuries apart, as if in the meantime the question had not moved a single step. No star, no lottery: convenience, perpetuity, beauty — the craft reduced to its grammar.

And one word in that passage acts as the telltale: "perpetuity." Where the Vitruvian triad said *firmitas*, solidity, Palladio writes perpetuity — not merely the building that stands, but the building that lasts, that crosses time intact. Perpetuity is the built version of the immobile society: the presupposition that what is good today will be good tomorrow, because tomorrow will resemble today. But here too the one who considers and the one who builds operate as if the city were in agreement, as if consent to the form had been given once and for all and did not have to be renegotiated with every generation. From Vitruvius to Palladio the discipline speaks always to the same mute interlocutor: an ideal client who never changes his mind because he does not exist.

In all these cases urban planning can exist, and does exist, because society is immobile — or because it is imagined immobile, which for the purposes of the design is the same. Hippodamus presumes citizens equal and still. Plato forbids growth. Vitruvius governs the soil before men arrive. Alberti reduces the city to a house. Filarete and More transfer it onto paper, where nothing moves by definition. Palladio takes as settled an agreement no one ever signed. Here is the formula of this first movement: urban planning exists only where life has not yet begun, or where it has been decided that it shall not begin. In the founding project and in utopia. That is, where there is no one to negotiate with.

I have devoted an entire book to the method of negotiation: to the idea that to govern is to compose interests that do not coincide, and that the possible agreement is worth more than the perfect solution. The ancient order is the only world in which that rule finds no application, because it is a world without counterparts: the founder speaks to an empty soil, the utopian to a reader. Neither of the two has to convince anyone who owns, who inhabits, who resists. That is why their design is total: not because their technique was superior to ours, but because their table was empty. Total design is not a conquest of the discipline. It is the photograph of a table without chairs.

That is why the ancient order is not the golden age of the discipline: it is its founding exception. As soon as society moves — and move it will, with trade, with factories, with crowds — the design ceases to suffice and the chase begins. The chapters that follow recount this: a series of attempts, ever more ambitious, to restore to

the city the immobility it had lost. And their outcome.

2

The City as Police, as Statistics, as Art

Cities move faster than those who govern them, and those who govern them know it. From this disproportion spring the three modern responses: power that cuts, science that measures, art that mourns. I recount them in this order because the order is itself an argument. First command. Then calculation. Finally nostalgia. Three ways of answering the same question — who governs a city that changes? — and three different outcomes. I state the moral in advance, so the reader need not wait for the end: wherever a city is truly governed, behind the design there is always a political power that decides. Wherever the design claims to suffice on its own, it begins not to suffice.

This is not an expository mannerism. Anyone who has administered learns quickly that questions are understood by their outcome, not by their premises. The documents all look alike: reports, tables, forecasts. The difference shows later, when someone must decide who pays and who yields. That is why I begin with the moral: because the three responses I am about to recount resemble one another in their intentions — to bring order to the changing city — and part ways precisely there, on the point the documents pass over in silence. Who answers for the choices. It is the question no technical document contains, and that every territory, sooner or later, asks.

Pope Sixtus V, between 1585 and 1590, orders Domenico Fontana to open the straight streets of Rome. The objective is declared without shame: straight streets to lead pilgrims from one basilica to another, and at the same time to keep malefactors in awe. Pilgrims and malefactors in the same design. Devotion and public order in the same layout. The intent unites, without embarrassment, the care of souls and the policing of streets: the city as order, before it is form. The Sistine straightaway is not an exercise in geometry: it is an act of government. The pope does not consult, does not mediate, does not pretend: he commands. And the city obeys.

In the brief span of the pontificate, the undertaking redraws Rome. That is enough, because the time of decision is short when the decision need not justify itself as something other than what it is. Fontana is an architect, and remains an architect: he executes, with skill, a mandate that is not his own. Neither of the two dreams of claiming that the straight streets derive from a study of flows or from a theory of dwelling. They derive from a will. History has passed judgment on that will; but one cannot pretend it is not there. It is this nakedness of command that makes the case instructive: it shows what is needed, at a minimum, for a city to change form. It takes someone who wants to change its form, and who has the strength to do so.

Gian Lorenzo Bernini, with the colonnade of Saint Peter's, would later teach that the piazza welcomes maternally, with open arms. An affectionate formula, an exact device: even the embrace serves to direct the crowd. The arms gather, orient, lead to the center. The

gentleness of the form does not change the nature of the operation. The Baroque city welcomes those who arrive, but it decides where they will go. It is worth pausing on this point, because it dismantles a misunderstanding destined to last: the idea that beauty is the opposite of command. It is not. In Rome, beauty is the form command takes when it works. The colonnade moves and channels at once; the two things do not contradict each other, they serve each other.

There is a point that is the heart of this chapter. Here the plan works. The streets of Sixtus V still exist, and Rome has walked on them for more than four centuries. It works precisely because it is not neutral technique: it is naked political command. A sovereign who decides, an architect who executes, a responsibility with a first and last name. To call it *urban planning* would be an anachronism, and not only of vocabulary: the word does not yet exist, and it does not exist because it is not needed. The distinction between technique and politics, which today we take as natural, was not there. What was needed was power, and power was there.

Words are born when things become a problem. As long as the government of the city coincides with government plain and simple, no one feels the need to call it by a separate name. The separate name will come when that coincidence breaks: when technique seeks to distinguish itself from politics, to present itself as knowledge and not as an arm. I set this observation aside, because it will be needed shortly. For now I record the fact: for centuries Europe transforms its cities without possessing the word *urban planning*, and transforms them — when it transforms them — with a

clarity about command that later, once the word was coined, would become rare.

Let us leap forward two and a half centuries. Georges-Eugène Haussmann, prefect of the Seine from 1853 to 1870, in his *Mémoires* — three volumes written at the end of his life, between 1890 and 1893 — claims credit for the gutting of old Paris: the alleys where cholera and barricades nested, gone; the *boulevards*, opened to circulate air, light, troops, and commerce. I reread the list: air, light, troops, and commerce. Hygiene, decorum, army, and market held together by the same street. No declared hierarchy, no scientific cover. The *boulevard* serves all of this at once, and Haussmann claims it.

What strikes me is the gesture even before the content. A man who, twenty years after the end of his office, publishes three volumes to claim what he did. Not to excuse himself: to claim. In my experience it is a rare gesture, and a revealing one. Those who have exercised real power feel the need to sign the work, even decades later; those who have merely certified the choices of others generally prefer that the work remain unsigned. The *Mémoires* are the signature affixed at the foot of Paris. One may contest the signature — it has been done, then and since — but the signature is there, and the contestation has an address.

Haussmann was not an urban planner: he was a politician with pencil and compass. A prefect who answered to a political power, not to a discipline. He does not feign neutrality, does not entrench himself behind studies: he guts, and says he has gutted. Everything about the Paris that emerged can be debated

— and it has been debated for a hundred and fifty years — but one thing cannot be denied: that transformation has someone responsible for it. Whoever wanted to call the *boulevards* to account knew whose door to knock on. It is the exact opposite of what would come later: plans signed by everyone and attributable to no one.

I say this with the freedom of one who has administered, in municipal and then in provincial government: there I learned that the territory distinguishes perfectly well between those who decide and those who certify. Citizens do not read the technical documents, but they grasp at once whether behind a project there is someone who shoulders its weight or only a procedure that refers to other procedures. When the decision has a face, one can negotiate, contest, correct: it is the method of negotiation, which I have always practiced and about which I have written elsewhere. When the decision hides behind technique, the citizen is left without an interlocutor: you cannot negotiate with a coefficient, you cannot protest against a table.

Sixtus V and Haussmann, each in his own way, had a face. And for this reason — not in spite of it — their cities work. I insist on the point because it overturns a widespread opinion. We tend to believe that urban transformation succeeds when it is well studied and fails when it is badly studied. The history I am recounting suggests another variable: it succeeds when it is well decided, that is, when someone answers for the decision with his own position. Study is useful, of course; but it comes after. Responsibility comes first, and no amount of study can replace it.

The second response is born on different ground. No longer the sovereign who opens streets, but the technician who observes the city and wants to refound it on data. It is a change of posture before it is a change of method: power looked at the city from above and cut it; science looks at it from the desk and counts it. Those who count feel, in good faith, more just than those who cut: the number seems impartial, the will does not. We shall see that precisely this impression is the heart of the misunderstanding. But it must be said at once who embodies it, because the second response has a precise father, and that father gave the entire discipline its name.

Ildefons Cerdà answers command with social statistics. In 1859 he designs the *Eixample* of Barcelona, the checkerboard of equal blocks that is to house the new city; in 1867 he publishes in Madrid the *General Theory of Urbanization*, and with it baptizes the discipline. His motto says it all: "the independence of the individual in the home, the independence of the home in the city." It is a generous program, the most generous of the three. It is also, read closely, a political program presented as science.

The novelty must be acknowledged. Sixtus V thought of pilgrims and malefactors, Haussmann of the street that serves everything at once; Cerdà thinks of the inhabitant. The checkerboard is egalitarianism made plan: no street nobler than another, no block commanding the others. Whoever designs this way does not merely want to order the city: he wants to emancipate it. But it is precisely here that the disguise shows most clearly. The equality of the blocks is a value

choice, not a result of calculation: statistics did not find it in the data, it put it there. And a value choice presented as a technical outcome is already, in miniature, the whole problem this book pursues.

Here lies the point that interests me. The word *urban planning* is born together with the illusion that founds it: the idea that statistics can replace choice. Cerdà measures, counts, tabulates, and believes that from the measurements the design will follow, as a theorem follows from axioms. But measurements do not decide. They say how much space an inhabitant is due; they do not say who will pay for the street, who will leave their home, who will profit from the expropriations. Those are choices, and choices are made by politics. At the exact moment it is baptized an autonomous science, urban planning begins not to exist: a science that needs someone else's power in order to be realized is not autonomous, it is ancillary.

I take up the observation I had set aside: words are born when things become a problem. 1867 is the year in which the government of the city becomes a problem of naming, because technique asks to separate itself from politics and to have a dignity of its own. The separation is understandable — no body of knowledge likes to present itself as a servant — but it has a price that will be paid for a long time. From that moment on, the plan can always invoke science against the decision, and the decision can always shelter behind science. Cerdà's baptism does not found a new power: it founds a durable misunderstanding about the old one.

The third response is that of art. Camillo Sitte, in 1889, publishes in Vienna *Der Städtebau nach seinen*

künstlerischen Grundsätzen — in English, *City Planning According to Artistic Principles* — and attacks both models: the straightaway of power and the checkerboard of science. He reproaches modern builders for having forgotten that the art of urban space is an art of picturesque irregularity; he observes that modern squares have become useless voids between buildings. The diagnosis captures something true, and anyone who has crossed certain squares designed at the drawing board knows it: they are voids, not places.

But his is the response of art that mourns, and mourning contains a contradiction that Sitte does not resolve. The curved streets and intimate squares he loves were designed by no one: they were made by time, by uses, by trade, by quarrels between neighbors. They are the result of a thousand minute negotiations, not of an artistic principle. To want to reproduce them by plan is to ask of design what only life has been able to produce. It is the paradox of every urban nostalgia: irregularity can be preserved, it cannot be decreed. And whoever decrees it obtains, at best, a stage set.

I pause on those thousand minute negotiations, because without meaning to, Sitte gets to the bottom of the question. The old city he likes is not a work of art: it is a work of agreements. Every widening, every curve, every frontage records a compromise between neighboring interests — one who ceded a wall, one who opened a passage, one who obtained a right over another's use. I have verified this in administration: the territory preserves the physical memory of its negotiations, and preserves it better than any archive. Sitte looks at that deposit of negotiations and sees in it

an aesthetic principle. He mistakes the effect for the cause. The beauty he mourns is not the aim of that process: it is its residue.

Placed in a row, the figures of this chapter compose a simple tableau. On one side, two men of government, Sixtus V and Haussmann, who use technique and do not ask it to cover for them: the design is theirs, and they answer for it. On the other, two scholars, Cerdà and Sitte, who ask the discipline — science for one, art for the other — to bear the weight of transformation on its own. It is not a contest between good men and bad: it is a difference of structure. The former can err, and those who suffer the error know whom to hold to account. The latter can be right, and their rightness remains on paper until a power adopts it. Visible responsibility produces cities; claimed neutrality produces texts.

Three responses, one lesson. Where the city is truly transformed — the Rome of Sixtus V, the Paris of Haussmann — there is a political power that decides and assumes responsibility, and technique is its arm, not its mask. Where the discipline claims to stand on its own — the science of Cerdà, the art of Sitte — it produces new words and empty squares. Seen from this movement, the refrain of the book sounds like this: urban planning does not exist as a knowledge that commands; it exists, when it exists, as the instrument of a power that does not hide.

The twentieth century will not accept the lesson. It will take Cerdà's ambition, multiply it, and attempt to build by way of plan no longer streets and blocks, but society entire. It is the most ambitious attempt of all, and the most instructive in its outcome. Here it is

enough to fix the point of departure: the three modern responses did not solve the problem of movement, they named it. Power cut it, science counted it, art mourned it. None of the three, on its own, governed it.

3
The Corrective Utopia: Fleeing the Metropolis to Save It

The total plan of the twentieth century has an antecedent. A milder attempt. The nineteenth-century metropolis produces its own counter-image. The smoke, the overcrowding, the rents — those who can, flee; those who cannot, stay. But between resignation and revolution a third way opens, the most curious of all: fleeing the metropolis to save it. Not tearing the city down. Building another one — small, measured, at a safe distance — and hoping that the big city learns from the small one. The idea has its own logic: if the disease is concentration, the cure is measure; if the metropolis will not be corrected from within, it is corrected by example, from without. A small-scale experiment to show the big city how to live better. It is the reasoning of every pilot project, which promises to change the system by starting from one corner of the system.

Those who propose it are not revolutionaries: they are reformers, people convinced that society can be corrected without breaking it. They do not ask for power: they ask for a plot of land, a design and a little trust. I call it the "corrective utopia" because it does not want to overturn the social order: it wants to amend it by design. It is the gentlest ambition urban planning has ever had. And it is also its most instructive defeat. Because precisely here, where the intentions are clearest and the project purest, one sees, better than anywhere

else, what design can do and what it cannot. This chapter tells the story of that defeat. Not to gloat: to understand where, exactly, the pencil stroke stops.

In 1898 Ebenezer Howard publishes in London, with the publisher Swan Sonnenschein, *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, and the title already says it all: a peaceful path to real reform. Every word carries weight. To-Morrow, not in some remote future. Peaceful, not insurrectionary. Real, not for show. Howard writes: "Town and country must be married, and out of this joyous union will spring a new hope, a new life, a new civilisation." It sounds like an idyll. It is not. The garden city is not a leafy suburb: it is a device for reforming society without passing through conflict, a marriage of convenience disguised as a marriage of love.

The heart of the book, in fact, does not lie in the diagrams everyone remembers. It lies in an idea almost no one remembers: land rent must return to the community that creates it. That is the point. Howard does not draw a city: he draws a social pact. The value the land acquires when a community settles on it — streets, schools, trade, life — must not end up with whoever owned the land by chance or by inheritance: it must return to those who produced that value, that is, to everyone. The rest — the concentric circles, the green belts, the proportions — is the wrapping of this idea, not the idea.

The passage deserves to be read closely, because that is where the book stops being a dream and becomes a program. In the second chapter — it is titled *The Revenue of Garden City* — Howard observes that the enormous difference in value between one piece of land

and another is due almost entirely to the presence of the population. Not to the merit of whoever owns it. That surplus, since it cannot be attributed to any individual, is called in current usage the *unearned increment*. Howard pauses on the word and corrects it: a more exact term — he writes — would be *collectively-earned increment*.

And so that the correction should not pass unnoticed, the book's index records it as an entry of its own: "'Unearned increment' a misnomer." Whoever seeks the heart of the book should not look at the plates: they should look at that index. The passage would remain identical in the second edition of 1902, the one that changes its title to *Garden Cities of To-morrow* and under which the book would circulate in Europe and America. The name is already the program. The urban form is the container. The content is the rent returned.

Correcting a vocabulary is a small thing, one might say. And yet words assign rights even before laws do. To say "unearned" leaves that value in a no man's land: no one has deserved it, so it goes to whoever arrives first — that is, to whoever already owns. To say "collectively earned" points to a precise creditor: the community. Between the two formulas there runs no lexical nuance: there runs the difference between an observation and a claim. Howard, with a brief parenthesis, opens a dispute on the most delicate point of any urban order: to whom belongs the value the city produces by the mere fact of existing. All the rest of the book is the attempt to settle that dispute amicably.

We know how it went. Of the pact, the container was built. The little villas yes, the greenery yes, the low

densities yes; the return of the rent, no. The garden suburbs that multiplied across half of Europe took from Howard the hedge and left him the reform. It is not a stumble, and it is not even a betrayal: it is a selection. Every society filters the utopias it receives and retains only the part it can digest. The rule this chapter means to show is all here: of a utopia, what survives is what does not disturb established interests; what touches them dies. And what touches them is always the land part.

Raymond Unwin takes the next step, the decisive one. In 1909, with *Town Planning in Practice*, he translates Howard into regulation: the vision becomes a manual, the pact becomes procedure. In 1912 he condenses the method into a thirty-eight-page pamphlet, printed in London for the Garden Cities & Town Planning Association. The verdict is already in the title, exclamation mark included: *Nothing Gained by Overcrowding!* The subtitle continues: *How the Garden City Type of Development May Benefit Both Owner and Occupier*. A true sentence, and a technical one: from it descend maximum densities, distances, alignments — the ancestors of our *planning standards*.

That subtitle is the most revealing part of the pamphlet. It promises that no one will lose: owner and occupier will both gain. It is the argument of someone who wants to persuade, not to impose — the classic opening of every negotiation: showing the other party that the agreement is in its interest. But precisely here the distance from Howard can be measured. Where the master had named a creditor — the community — the disciple reassures the debtor. The reform that was

meant to shift the rent now presents itself as a good deal for those who collect the rent. It was the condition for getting the rule approved. And in the passage from utopia to rule something evaporates. The pact on rent cannot be turned into regulation: either the political will to enforce it exists, or it does not. The fate is recurrent, and it is worth setting it down: of the utopia the rule remains, the pact falls.

Why it always happens can be seen by setting the two things side by side. The rule is impersonal: it fixes distances, densities, heights, and imposes them on everyone in the same way, naming neither winners nor losers. That is why it lets itself be approved. The pact, by contrast, names: it says who must give back, and to whom. The rule applies once written; the pact must be kept every day, against the interest of those who would profit from breaking it, and therefore it requires a political force to watch over it through time. A regulation outlives its author; a pact dies the moment the will that sustains it dies. That is why of Howard the densities remained and the rent did not: the densities lay in the rule, the rent lay in the pact. It is not a law written down anywhere. It operates in silence, inside every plan, and it does not need to be stated in order to prevail.

Tony Garnier goes further still. His project for an industrial city, exhibited in 1904 and published in 1917 under the title *Une cité industrielle*, anticipates the entire twentieth century: a city whose land is public, without fences between lots, ordered according to work. Public land: Garnier puts into the drawing what Howard had put into the pact. Where the Englishman had

trusted in a voluntary agreement, the Frenchman draws the result directly, as if landed property could be overcome by dint of plates. And indeed his city remains on paper. One can draw anything, even the abolition of landed property; but the drawing does not abolish it. Paper endures what society does not endure.

Three utopias, three shipwrecks at the same point. They do not fail on form — form pleases, sells, gets copied. They fail on the land part, that is, on the political part: who takes the value of the land. It is a question no design can close, because it is not a question of design. It is a question of power relations, and power relations are governed in one way only: by negotiating, interest against interest, until the point is found at which each side gives something up. Where negotiation is missing, the project is built by halves. And the half that gets built is always the one that redistributes nothing. Howard had at least intuited the problem, enough to write a book that was in substance a proposal for an agreement; Garnier had left it out of the drawing, entrusting to the page what had to be won at the table. The outcome, by different routes, was the same.

Then there are those who look at things from higher up. Patrick Geddes, in 1915, with *Cities in Evolution*, founds regional planning and hands the discipline the aphorism that every plan cites and no one practices: *survey before plan*. "Study first, draw later." It sounds obvious, and instead it is the discipline's most honest admission about itself. Because it recognizes that knowledge precedes design — and that design, when it finally arrives, arrives late with respect to life, which has

meanwhile moved on. A plan founded on study is a plan that confesses its own position: second, never first. Reality dictates, the plan copies it out.

Geddes adds a single sentence: "A city is more than a place in space, it is a drama in time." A drama has actors, and actors have interests, memories, fears. A drama is not drawn: it is accompanied, mediated, negotiated with its protagonists scene by scene. Whoever truly studies before planning discovers precisely this — and discovers, too, why the *survey* remains an opening ritual more than a method. To study all the way down would mean admitting that design alone is not enough, that the decisive part of the work lies not on the drawing board but in the rooms where interests talk to each other. Better to cite the aphorism and move on to the pencil. The homage to Geddes is universal; his lesson, uncomfortable, remains a dead letter.

Lewis Mumford takes stock of the whole trajectory. In November 1937, in the pages of *Architectural Record*, he publishes an essay with an elementary and daring title: *What is a City?* The answer is a definition in five attributes, and it must be quoted whole: "The city in its complete sense, then, is a geographic plexus, an economic organization, an institutional process, a theater of social action, and an aesthetic symbol of collective unity." Five natures in a single object: geography, economy, institutions, action, symbol. The "theater of social action" is one of the five — but it is the one that holds the other four together, because without actors the plexus is mere ground, the organization is bookkeeping, the process is paper and the symbol means nothing to anyone.

In 1961, in *The City in History* — for Italian readers *La città nella storia*, translated in 1963 — the theater is gone: the city he describes there has become a machine, and what the machine produces best is traffic jams. Between the two dates run more than twenty years and an entire season of plans, and the reckoning lies entirely in the lexicon: from theater to machine, from social action to traffic jam. The same author, the same subject, two opposite words. The corrective utopia wanted to save the metropolis by fleeing it. The metropolis never noticed the flight.

On this I do not quote: I narrate. As an administrator I have seen the same scene on a smaller scale: the design that promises, the land part that resists, the agreement that decides. No metropolis is needed to verify the rule; any plan will do, in any territory. Wherever planning is done, the project sooner or later meets the point at which someone would have to give up a value they consider theirs; and at that point design stops commanding and politics begins. From this I drew a conviction that I later placed at the foundation of the method of negotiation: what gets built is what has been agreed upon, not what has been drawn best. Elsewhere, in *Il principe della Repubblica*, I tried to state it for government in general; here it holds for the governance of territory, which is its most stubborn case. Howard, after all, knew it — his book proposed a pact, not a site plan; even his index, with that entry on the wrong name of the rent, pointed to where the stakes lay. It was the century that read him backwards, keeping the site plan and tearing up the pact.

Here, then, is the rule, seen from the angle of utopia: urban planning does not exist as a drawn reform. When the project claims to correct society without negotiating with the interests that run through it, the form is built and the redistributive substance is lost; the pencil stroke survives, the reason it was traced dies. The garden city without the return of the rent is a neighborhood of little villas. Beautiful, sometimes. But it is not a reform: it is its memory.

And the memory of a reform has an insidious effect: it occupies the place of the reform, represents it, makes it seem to have happened. The greenery is there, the low houses are there; whoever strolls through a garden suburb does not see what is missing, because what is missing — the rent returned — is nowhere to be seen. That is why the defeat of the corrective utopia went almost unnoticed: it had the form of a victory.

The corrective utopia nonetheless leaves a dangerous inheritance. It showed that gentle design is not enough — and the conclusion the twentieth century will draw from it will not be modesty. It will be the opposite: if the orderly flight does not correct the metropolis, then the city must be remade in its entirety, with more technique, more authority, more scale. If the flaw seemed to lie in the mildness of the means, the dose will be increased. After the garden city will come the total plan, its confidence intact and enlarged, convinced it will succeed where the reformers had failed because it will have at its disposal what they lacked: power. We shall see what it does with it. And it will fail at the same point, only bigger.

4
The Short Century of the Total Plan

Every church has its pope. The church of the total plan had Le Corbusier. The twentieth century — the short century, the one counted in wars and reconstructions — was the age in which the discipline of urban planning advanced its greatest claim: not to correct the city, but to refound it; not to accompany life, but to design it in full. It is the apex of the illusion. And it is, precisely for that reason, the point where my thesis can be seen more clearly than anywhere else: at the moment when urban planning declared it could do everything, it turned out that it could do almost nothing. Not for lack of talent — never did the discipline have better minds — but through an error of premise: the conviction that the city was an object to be designed and not a process to be negotiated.

It is worth walking the century station by station. Not as a historian of architecture — I am not one — but as an administrator who has learned to read documents the way one reads official acts: what they promise, who signs them, what follows the promise. It is a modest method. But it has one advantage: it does not let itself be enchanted by forms. Faced with a manifesto, it always asks the same three things one asks of a resolution — the object, the funding, the official responsible for the procedure. Applied to the sacred texts of twentieth-century urban planning, the method

yields instructive results. Let us take them in order of date.

In 1923, in *Vers une architecture*, Le Corbusier writes: "A house is a machine for living in." The sentence is famous. It is worth taking it literally, because famous sentences defend themselves best when read in haste. A machine is designed, mass-produced, replaced when it grows old. It has no memory, no inheritance, no next-door neighbors. Above all, it has no land registry: no one quarrels over the boundary of a machine, no one receives one from his father with the moral obligation not to sell it. If the house is a machine, dwelling is a function. And if dwelling is a function, whoever governs it is a technician, not a citizen.

That sentence already contains the century's program: to remove the city from bargaining among men and hand it over to calculation. And the book closes with the alternative on which the whole edifice rests: "Architecture or Revolution. Revolution can be avoided." Observe the structure of the offer. It is not an aesthetic proposal: it is a pact offered to governments. Give me the city and I will spare you the conflict. The rest — the forms, the materials, the manifestos — is a consequence of this opening move, which is not architectural: it is political, even if it presents itself as technical. Anyone with experience of negotiations recognizes the type at first glance: the bidder who sets, on his own, the price, the goods and the deadline. Negotiations like that, in administrative life, never close.

Two years later, in *Urbanisme*, the tone turns military. "The winding road is the Pack-Donkey's Way, the straight road is Man's Way." And for the inherited

city Le Corbusier reserves, in the writings of those years, the crudest formula: "We must kill the corridor street." Kill. The verb is his. Not amend, not correct, not adapt: kill. The existing city — the one grown by successive adjustments, by markets, by boundary disputes settled before a notary — is not to be amended: it is to be suppressed. The street, which for centuries had been the place of exchange and encounter, becomes an error of layout.

An administrator who has had a historic center in his care knows how heavily the echo of that condemnation still weighs today: entire generations of technicians trained to distrust the city before their eyes. I have seen it for myself. In the offices, in the committees, in the advisory opinions, the curved street remained — by training, not by bad faith — a problem to be solved rather than a heritage to be understood. It took decades for the discipline to look at the alley again without the instinct to straighten it. And meanwhile life, which had not read *Urbanisme*, went on using the Pack-Donkey's ways for the things of men: meeting, selling, watching one's children from the window.

In 1933 the doctrine becomes canon. The fourth international congress of modern architecture — held partly at sea between Marseille and Athens, partly in the city that would give the Charter its name — fixes the principle. Le Corbusier would put it on paper, reworked, ten years later: "The keys to urbanism are to be found in the four functions: inhabiting, working, recreation (in leisure time), and circulation." Four boxes. A man's life, however, knows no such borders: one works where one lives, one takes one's recreation in the street, one moves

around in order to meet. *Zoning* — this being the technical name of the fourfold division — presumes that functions let themselves be separated the way colors are separated on a plan sheet.

Real cities, ever since, have done nothing but refute it, mixing what the plan divided. Yet that canon entered the manuals, the laws, the building regulations of half the world. The four functions still survive, normative fossils. In the experience of anyone who sits in an administration, those functions are handled every week: zones that forbid the shop below one's home, permitted uses that treat working and dwelling as incompatible substances, plan amendments ("varianti") requested to put back together what the drawing had divided. And every amendment is — note well — a negotiation: the plan separates on principle, life stitches back together out of necessity, and in between stands the administrator who negotiates the exception. The canon produces, as its stable effect, its own opposite.

Zoning, for that matter, also reveals the other side of the weakness: dependence. The four boxes decide nothing on their own. How many people will live there, what work there will be to do, where it will pay to open and where it will pay to close — all of this is settled by demography and the economy, and the box merely receives their effects or obstructs them too late. An industrial zone remains a meadow if no firm arrives; a residential zone remains paper if the families leave. The plan assigns the colors; the forces that fill or empty the colors lie outside the plan. It is the first part of my thesis, applied to the canon: the discipline that proclaimed itself an autonomous science was working,

in reality, with variables that other sciences — and other powers — delivered to it already decided.

Then there is the publishing history of that document, and it is worth telling, because it says more than many treatises. The charter came out in 1943, in Paris, from the publisher Plon, in the middle of the war, with an introductory discourse by Jean Giraudoux. On the cover, no author's name: the signature was "Groupe CIAM-France." Le Corbusier — who had reworked and drafted those theses — did not appear. He would sign with his own name only in the 1957 re-edition, with the Éditions de Minuit. Fourteen years later. When the doctrine had by then won, when the construction sites of the reconstruction spoke its language, the author came out into the open and the charter became his.

I do not intend to put on trial an editorial choice made in the middle of a war. What interests me is the structure, not the biography. A document that claims to lay down the law for everyone's cities comes out anonymous, covered by a collective signature; the individual signature arrives once success is secured. In administrative life the reverse order holds, and it is an order that admits no exceptions: first you sign, then you see how it goes. Whoever signs a resolution answers for it — with his assets, his honor, sometimes in court — even if the resolution proves wrong. The doctrine of the total plan could afford what no administrator is allowed: to pronounce without answering, and to claim credit only afterward. It is the difference between power and its representation. Power signs first.

In 1935, in *La Ville Radieuse*, the completed vision arrives: the city of tomorrow raised on *pilotis*, the

ground left free beneath the buildings. And it is here that the alternative of 1923 — architecture or revolution — shows its full reach. The discipline formulates the most ambitious promise of its history: the plan can replace politics. Give men rational housing, air, light and greenery, and they will no longer have reasons to rebel. Social conflict, resolved by way of design. No urban planner, before, had dared so much. No one, after, has dared as much.

Note what is being promised to governments: not better houses, but the social order itself, in exchange for full delegation to the designer. It is the offer of a stand-in. I have spent part of my life studying negotiations — to the point of making a method of them — and this one has a flaw that makes it unacceptable: it asks for everything at once against a result invisible and far away. No serious contracting party accepts such terms. Politics, by luck or by instinct, never signed that delegation in full: it took from the plan what it needed — the lexicon, the drawings, the technical authority to put on display — and kept the decisions for itself. It did, that is, what it always does: it negotiated.

The verification lies in the facts. The Radiant City was never built. What was built in its name — the great single-function districts of postwar Europe — did not obey the design: it obeyed the demography that pressed, the public money available, the housing emergency that allowed no time. The language was that of the plan; the engine was elsewhere. Those districts were born where there was cheap public land, to the extent the funding allowed, at the speed the urgency imposed. Three variables — land, money, time — and none of the three

was in the designer's hands. To the designer fell the last step of the paperwork: by the time he opened the drawing, the object and the funding already bore the signatures of others.

Here, again, is my thesis, seen from the angle of its apex: when it claimed to replace politics, urban planning proved that it did not exist as a power. What existed was need, which used it as a vocabulary. And what existed was negotiation — between ministries and municipalities, between public coffers and firms, between the urgency and its waiting lists — which decided where, how much and when. To the plan remained the task of giving those decisions a garb that would look like a project. No small task, mind: decisions need a form in order to be executed. But form is not power. It is its calligraphy.

Le Corbusier was not alone. As early as 1919 Walter Gropius had issued his appeal to the builders of his time: "Together let us desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity." In one unity. The total work of art, extended from the building to the city, from the city to life. The idea that form, if coherent to the very end, generates by itself the society that deserves it. It is a faith, not a science — and I say so without contempt, because faiths move more construction sites than analyses do, and anyone who administers knows it: an idea people believe in shifts more resources than ten feasibility studies. But like all faiths it asked of the facts only confirmations, never refutations. And the facts, for a few decades, had the courtesy to keep silent.

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe condensed that faith into formulas that have endured. *Less is more*. And then the definition that is worth a manifesto: "Architecture is the will of the epoch translated into space." Finally the craftsman's caveat, this one too handed down in English: *God is in the details*. Limpid sentences, of that limpidity which discourages objections. But the second contains a question no one asked: who ascertains the will of an epoch? By what procedure, before what assembly? An epoch signs no proxies. It does not vote, does not elect, does not revoke. Whoever declares he is translating it into space is, in reality, deciding in its place.

It is the exact point where technique slides into standing in for politics. In real assemblies — the ones where the will is counted by show of hands — that translation never comes out so clean. The will of a chamber forms through amendments, postponements, mediations, votes that move a comma and, with the comma, the meaning. It is a slow, impure, minuted process. Precisely for this reason it is ascertainable: at the end there is a number, and the number says who has won. The will of an epoch, by contrast, leaves no minutes. It is a blank proxy that the translator fills in by himself. I distrust, by trade, blank proxies: whoever invokes them is almost always signing in somebody else's place.

Frank Lloyd Wright, who was Le Corbusier's opposite in almost everything, nevertheless shared the same underlying certainty. In his autobiography of 1932, *An Autobiography*, he writes: "No house should ever be on a hill or on anything. It should be of the hill. Belonging to

it." The passage sits in the section devoted to Taliesin, the house Wright had built for himself, in Wisconsin, on — or rather: of — the hill. And the detail is not ornamental. The century's most beautiful sentence on dwelling arises from a limit case: a house in which client, designer and inhabitant were the same person.

There, and only there, does the translation of will into space truly succeed, because there is no one to negotiate with: the will is one, the land is his, the project obeys. Taliesin proves that the pure project exists — when the table has a single chair. A city is the exact opposite: thousands of wills, thousands of property titles, no designer who inhabits all the houses. To extend Taliesin's rule to the city is to suppose that the city has a single master. It does not. Fortunately, I would add: where it does, it is no longer a city, it is a property.

Le Corbusier's machine, Mies's silence, Wright's organism: three distant poetics, irreconcilable on the plane of forms. But a single faith sustains them: that the will of the epoch can be translated into space by formal decree, from the height of a drawing table. On this point the church knew no schisms: there were quarrels over the rite, never over the dogma. And the dogma was precisely what needed to be discussed, because it contained the wrong premise — the city as the object of an author, not as the outcome of many contracting parties.

The century's most explicit case is Ernst May. In Frankfurt, between 1925 and 1930, he built entire districts starting from a simple conviction, called by its name: the need for housing was the most urgent social need. No aesthetics disguised as necessity: the engine

was declared. The minimum dwelling as a political answer before a formal one, design as the instrument of an explicit social mandate. Of all the century's protagonists, May is the one who speaks the language an administrator understands: there is a need, there is a mandate, there is a program that answers the mandate. No epochs to translate. A task to carry out.

And indeed that experience lasted as long as the mandate lasted: after 1930 the design stopped. May, by declaring the engine, had confessed without meaning to that the engine was not the plan. This is why I consider him the clearest of all in saying where the push came from: the others promised an epoch, he was answering a need. And needs, unlike epochs, have an expiry date. Anyone who has held elective office knows this arithmetic from direct experience: a program lives as long as the majority that sustains it, and no design, however good, survives on its own the lapse of its mandate. It is not cynicism. It is the condition of every delegated power — and the plan, when it works, is delegated power, not power of its own.

Then there is the Italian way, more cultivated and more cautious. Giovanni Astengo attempted it with a conviction I render in my own words: a city is not preserved by preserving its stones, but by preserving the way it is inhabited. It is the most intelligent idea of the Italian planning century, because it shifts the object of protection from matter to life, from the wall to what the wall keeps. Against the plan that kills the street, a plan that wants to save the street and what happens in it. Hard to imagine a more radical correction, within the same discipline.

And it is also the idea that reveals its limit. Because the way of inhabiting is not preserved by zoning: it is preserved if the work remains, and the children, the shops, the reasons not to leave. All things the plan records and no plan produces. They depend on the economy, on demography, on the choices of a thousand families that no drawing binds. One can forbid the transformation of a building; one cannot order a family to stay inside it, nor a shop to balance its books. The most refined of the Italian schools thus confesses, in its very principle, that it depends on what it does not govern. It is my thesis turned inside out: no longer the plan that claims too much, but the plan that wants the right thing and discovers it lacks the tools. Astengo had seen rightly about the end and was silent about the means — because the means, quite simply, the discipline did not possess.

Ludovico Quaroni thought of the city as a fabric, not as a monument. The image is right, and anyone who administers recognizes it as true every day. But a fabric is woven by many, by alternating hands, over long stretches of time, with threads no central loom controls. The monument, yes, that can be designed and inaugurated: it has an author, a date, a signature. The fabric, no. The fabric is negotiated, thread by thread, among owners, firms, administrations, families that buy and families that sell. Every sale is a thread, every building permit a knot, every inheritance a reweaving no plan has foreseen.

Quaroni pointed to the exact destination and, in pointing to it, took it away from the discipline that claimed to reach it alone. If the city is a fabric, its

governance is of necessity a weaving of agreements: there is no way to weave by decree. Which is another way of saying what I have been repeating for years — the right metaphor dissolves the claim that produced it. The paradox of the Italian school lies here: the more it refined its intelligence of the city, the more it proved that that intelligence was not enough to govern it. To understand is not to have power. The discipline, however, could not say so aloud without dissolving itself.

There remains the case that seems to refute me and instead confirms me: Adriano Olivetti at Ivrea, with his conviction that the factory could not stand against the community. There the plan truly worked: houses, services, landscape, measure. Whoever looks in the twentieth century for a place where design and life coincide finds it there. But why did it work? Because the client was, in a single person, economic power and social power. The factory-community decided wages, schedules, services, the destiny of families; the plan translated into space a will that was one, not an epoch. It is Taliesin on an urban scale: the single client, or nearly so. Where urban planning seemed to exist, what existed in reality was a power that had commissioned it to make a fair copy of its agreements.

Take away the factory and the design remains: beautiful, orderly, inert. Which takes nothing away from the quality of that design — the fair copy was truly beautiful — but says everything about its nature: it was an effect, not a cause. The involuntary confirmation is the most solid of all, because no one sought it. Ivrea was not built to prove my thesis; it proves it precisely

because it was built for something else. Every time I hear that experience cited as proof that the plan can, I answer with the question I put to every successful plan: who was there, behind it? There is always someone. And that someone is never the plan.

Last station, the balance sheet. The century of the total plan is the century in which plans were more disregarded than implemented. It was not an accident along the way: it was the very structure of the enterprise, because a plan that is not born of an agreement can only be disregarded, sooner or later, by those who never signed it. Experience teaches this before books do: I verified it as an administrator, in Nuoro, act after act. The method I have practiced since then rests on a simple rule: no act walks without the signatures that hold it up, and a plan is an act like any other. It is not a brilliant rule. It is a rule that works, which is another thing.

The twentieth century believed the opposite and left as its inheritance districts no one had wanted that way and plans no one has ever seen completed. It also left, it must be said, a wealth of intelligence about the city that no other century had produced: the point is not that those minds got the calculations wrong, it is that they were solving a problem different from the real one. They designed the object; the problem was the process. In the century in which it claimed to exist most, urban planning existed least. The sequel to this story — the revolt of those who lived in those districts — begins from the point of view of those who walk the city, not of those who look at it from above.

5
The Revolt of the Sidewalk

The sidewalk, then. The story starts again from there — but with one clarification: it was not only the inhabitants of those neighborhoods who revolted. In the Sixties something happens that no discipline likes to tell about itself: criticism stops coming from outside and begins to come from within. It is not the nostalgics of the old town who call the plan into question. It is not the owners struck by a restriction, nor planning's perennial adversaries. It is the best — scholars, architects, reporters who had looked at the city up close, walking it. When a discipline is contested by its adversaries, it defends itself. When it is contested by its most clear-eyed children, it falters. This chapter recounts that mutiny.

Anyone who has governed knows the difference between the two kinds of contestation. An institution can long withstand criticism that comes from outside: it classifies it as partisan interest, neutralizes it on points of procedure, sometimes even uses it to close ranks. What it cannot withstand is the doubt of those inside — of those who know the records, have followed the files, have seen how decisions are really formed. That doubt cannot be dismissed as ignorance, nor as preconceived hostility. It must be discussed on the merits. And to discuss on the merits, for a discipline that had presented itself to the world as a science, is already to admit that the merits are debatable. In the Sixties urban planning enters this condition. Not through a siege: through a

row of books written by its own.

The first act is staged in New York. On one side Robert Moses, New York's great builder of infrastructure: the man of the apparatus, of procedures, of construction sites. On the other Jane Jacobs, an observer of neighborhood life, who looked at the city from the sidewalk, not from the drawing board. Jacobs does not come to the clash as a theorist: she comes as a reporter. In April 1958 she publishes in *Fortune* magazine an article entitled *Downtown Is for People*, part of a series of pieces collected, that same year, in the volume *The Exploding Metropolis*. Before the thesis comes the method, declared with the simplicity of a practical instruction: you must go out and walk.

Immediately after that invitation comes the sentence that is an entire program: "There is no logic that can be superimposed on the city; people make it, and it is to them, not buildings, that we must fit our plans." It is worth reading slowly, because it overturns the order of operations on which the discipline rested. The plan presupposes a logic prior to the city, which the city is meant to receive. Jacobs says that this logic does not exist: what exists is the people who make the city, and plans — if they are to be of any use — must fit them, not the buildings. It is not yet a book: it is a magazine article. But the overturning is already all there. In 1961, against Moses, she publishes *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, and that sentence becomes a book.

Her idea of safety is neither the fence nor the guard post: it is eyes on the street. The shopkeeper looking out, the neighbor at the window, the passerby. It is an idea that any local administrator can verify without need

of studies: living streets watch over themselves, dead streets are watched by no one, however many patrols are stationed there. Real surveillance cannot be contracted out: it is inhabited. And it is inhabited only where the street offers reasons to stay — a shop, a doorstep, a reason to look out. This too is not a doctrine: it is an observation anyone can repeat.

And her idea of the city is a workshop of reciprocity: "Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody." It is not an opening line, placed there to capture the reader: it is the sentence with which Jacobs closes the chapter on the myths of diversity. The argument is twofold: the city provides for everybody only if it is made by everybody. A condition, not a wish. It is not a theory lowered onto reality. It is the report of what can be seen from the sidewalk.

But what matters, for the thesis of this essay, is not only how Jacobs wrote: it is the ground she chose. She did not oppose Moses with a counter-plan, an alternative design, a more refined zoning. She opposed him with a book and with an idea of the city that people could recognize as their own. The choice of ground, in any conflict, tells you what the contender considers decisive. Whoever answers a plan with another plan accepts the idea that the match is played among technicians, and that the better design wins. Whoever answers a plan with a book moves the match to where it is really decided: in recognition, in adherence, in consensus.

The episode is remembered, in public memory, as a defeat of Moses by political means, not by technical

ones: the settled reading holds that the plan was not beaten by another plan, but by a society that organized itself. If this reading is well founded — and anyone who has governed a territory finds it hard to doubt it — it is the practical demonstration of what I have been arguing. When a design meets a society that organizes itself, the design does not win: whoever builds the agreement wins. Urban planning as a power that imposes itself, in that season, showed that it did not exist.

On one side the entire apparatus: technical offices, funding, procedures, the legitimacy of those who had been building for decades. On the other a book, a neighborhood, the capacity to hold people together. If urban planning were truly a science that commands, the outcome would have been a foregone conclusion: no science loses to a committee. The statics of a bridge does not bend to a neighborhood assembly. But the plan is not the statics of a bridge. The plan is a proposal for an arrangement, and it needs, in order to stand, a society that makes it its own — and this is a political condition, not a technical one. The asymmetry, read rightly, is the proof that the match was being played on a ground different from the declared one.

The lesson does not concern America alone: it concerns anyone who has ever governed a territory. The strength of a project does not lie in its drawings: it lies in the consensus it manages to gather around its drawings. I learned this from failures before I learned it from successes. The technically soundest projects I have seen come to a halt always ran aground at the same point: the community did not recognize them as its own. And the imperfect projects I have seen completed all had the

same gift: someone, in the territory, had adopted them. Whoever forgets the second part, sooner or later, loses the first as well.

Jacobs's contestation was frontal: a declared conflict, with a recognizable adversary and a visible stake. But a mutiny does not need to be loud to be deep. In those same years other children of the discipline choose paths that do not pass through confrontation: they observe, they measure, they describe. They do not attack the plan; they confine themselves to studying the city as it is, and to recording how little it coincides with the city as the plans represent it. The distance between the two objects, once documented, does its work on its own.

So the critique also takes a quieter route, that of perception. Kevin Lynch, in 1960, publishes *The Image of the City* and shifts the gaze from the design to the mind of those who inhabit it: "Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings." The city that counts is not the city of use designations: it is the one people carry in their heads, made of paths, edges, landmarks. And that mental map has a value no drawing records: "A good environmental image gives its possessor an important sense of emotional security."

Anyone who governs meets that map every day, even without knowing that someone has theorized it. He meets it when citizens call a place by a name that appears on no map, and everyone understands which place it is. He meets it when a new street remains foreign for years, because it has not entered the routes people carry in their heads. The perceived city has an inertia of its own and a geography of its own; and whoever makes decisions about territory would do well

to know it, because it is inside that geography — not inside the drawings — that his decisions will be accepted or rejected.

Gordon Cullen, in 1961, reaches a kindred conclusion from the side of the landscape: in *Townscape* he describes the city as a drama in space, a succession of revelations. His unit of measure is the step, not the zone. A drama cannot be zoned. A revelation cannot be regulated. The lived city — the one traversed on foot, one corner after another — does not coincide with the city divided into functions. They are two different objects. The plan governs the second and ignores the first, which is the only one that exists for those who live there.

Lynch and Cullen are not polemicists. They measure, they draw, they catalogue; their tone is that of the inventory, not of the battle. And it is precisely this that makes them hard to dismiss: a polemicist can be contested on tone, an inventory only on content. Yet their work has a corrosive effect. If the real city is the perceived city, then the city of use designations is an administrative convention: useful to the offices, mute for the inhabitants. What remains is an environment that each person recomposes in his own way, walking, and that no drawing can prescribe. One can regulate what is built. One cannot regulate the gaze.

Then comes logic. Christopher Alexander, in 1965, writes that a city is not a tree: it cannot be reduced to a hierarchical structure. The tree is the logical form of the plan — each part depends on a higher part, nothing overlaps, every element has one place and one only. It is a convenient form for those who govern: it allows zones

to be delimited, competences to be assigned, responsibilities to be attributed. The real city is a weave of overlapping sets: uses that pile onto one another, multiple belongings on the same ground. The same street is at once a route, a place of commerce, a place of encounter, a boundary between two belongings; and none of these natures cancels the others.

And every overlap, translated into an administrator's language, is a negotiation: two interests on the same place that must find an agreement. Where the tree sees a single branch, the real city presents two or three legitimate claims together, and no hierarchy orders them by itself: someone has to reconcile them. The hierarchical structure does not describe real urban life. It is the analysis of form that says so, not ideology — and this is what makes the argument so solid: Alexander does not challenge the plan's intentions, he challenges its logic.

In 1977, in *A Pattern Language*, Alexander will try to rebuild from below what he had dismantled from above: "Each pattern describes a problem which occurs over and over again in our environment, and then describes the core of the solution." Not an overall design: a repertoire of partial, reusable solutions, to be adapted case by case. Anyone who has negotiated implementation plans recognizes the method at once. You do not start from the final design: you start from the problem that returns, and from the core of agreement that dissolves it. Problems, in the administration of a territory, really do return: places and people change, but the structure of the conflict is recurrent, and recurrent too is the form of the understanding that closes it. It is

already, without saying so, a negotiated urban planning: solutions in the plural, never the solution in the singular.

Robert Venturi, in 1966, answers Mies van der Rohe with four words: "Less is a bore." It is the rejection of an aesthetics of purity in the name of the variety of the real. The provocation then finds its seat: in March 1968 Venturi and Denise Scott Brown publish in *The Architectural Forum* the article *A Significance for A&P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas*; in 1972 the argument becomes a book, *Learning from Las Vegas*, written with Scott Brown and Izenour. The arc is the same as Jacobs's: first the article, then the book.

The first part of the book opens like this: "Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect. Not the obvious way, which is to tear down Paris and begin again, as Le Corbusier suggested in the 1920s, but another, more tolerant way; that is, to question how we look at things." The second half of the sentence matters more than the first. The revolutionary gesture is a change of gaze. Learning from what exists — even from the vulgar, even from the commercial sign, even from what the discipline had always looked down on. It is the reversal of the relationship: no longer technique correcting life, but life instructing technique. An administrator understands it instantly, because it is his daily trade: first you listen to what is there, then you decide what to do with it.

Aldo Rossi, in 1966, carries the critique onto the terrain of time. In *L'architettura della città* he writes that "the city itself is the collective memory of its people" and that architecture is "the fixed stage for human events."

Urban artifacts persist beyond their functions: the market square remains a square when the market has gone, the convent becomes a school, then a barracks, then a museum, and remains itself. It is the exact opposite of zoning, which assigns each piece of ground a function and expects it to stay there. The city refutes the plan in the simplest way there is: by outlasting it.

Time, after all, is the variable the plan handles worst. A plan photographs a present and projects a future; but the present ages quickly, and the future always arrives different from how it was drawn. The urban artifacts Rossi speaks of, by contrast, cross the decades changing content and keeping form. I know this without need of theory — the historic centers I have administered have changed function ten times and identity not once. Whoever administers them learns it early: much can be decided about the use of those places, almost nothing about their meaning, which belongs to the memory of those who inhabit them and is handed down on its own, without asking permission of any use designation.

Giancarlo De Carlo, in 1969, hands the discipline the words I feel are closest to the thesis of this essay, and I gladly acknowledge it: "Architecture is too important to be left to architects." And his target is the plan as an authoritarian act presenting itself in technical dress. Authoritarian: that is the decisive adjective. The plan presents itself as calculation and operates as command; it dresses as technical necessity what is political choice. It is the subtlest form of authority, because it does not declare itself: whoever objects to a command exercises a right, whoever objects to a calculation passes for incompetent. To dress a choice as calculation is to

withdraw it from the discussion it would be entitled to.

I have been saying the same thing for years from the other end of the table — the end of those who have had to get plans approved, in a council chamber, with votes. And from that end of the table the fiction is more visible than from any other. If the plan really were a calculation, there would be no need to vote on it: it would be verified, as a count is verified. Instead the merits are voted on, the merits are amended, the merits are negotiated. Technique does not deliberate. Someone deliberates, in the name of something. And that someone answers for his choices to those who elected him — which is exactly the difference between a command dressed as necessity and a political decision that takes responsibility for itself.

Henri Lefebvre, in 1968, in *Le droit à la ville*, gives the same intuition the form of a right: the right to the city, which in his elaboration becomes the right not to be excluded from centrality. And in 1974, in *La production de l'espace*, he makes it into a system: "Space is a social product." What I say as an administrator, from a council chamber, is said from the left, from a professor's chair. Space is not a datum that technique organizes: it is an outcome that society produces. And if space is a social product, its governance can only be negotiation among those who produce it. The roads to get there are different — the critique of ideology on one side, administrative practice on the other — but the point of arrival coincides.

The convergence is not obvious. The philosopher and the administrator work on different materials: one on concepts, the other on practices. When they arrive by

independent routes at the same conclusion, it comes out doubly strengthened. If space were a technical datum, the professor's chair and the council chamber would have to tell of it the same way, as one tells of a law of nature. If instead the chair describes it as a social product and the chamber experiences it as an object of negotiation, it is because both have met the same reality: no organization of space stands without the participation of those who produce space by inhabiting it.

I verified it before I read it. As a member of the city government in Nuoro I learned that the sidewalk knows things the plan drawing does not know: where people really cross, which square lives and which is only a patch of color on the design, which function foreseen on paper never settled into reality. Later, at the Province, I saw the same distance on a larger scale: the size of the objects changes, not the nature of the problem. Even where the forecasts had been made scrupulously, reality took it upon itself to choose on its own what to build and what to leave on paper.

I have never met a plan that was right on its own. I have met plans that became true when someone — a mayor, a committee, a business, a community — decided to make them their own. The passage is always the same: the document remains a dead letter until an act of will adopts it, and adoption is not obtained by decree — it is obtained by negotiating. I have given this passage its name elsewhere: negotiation. I made it the center of *Vincere in politica con la trattativa*, because it is the passage that the technical dress of plans conceals and that administrative practice, every day, brings back

to light.

This is why I call these years the revolt of the sidewalk. It was not a revolt against the city: it was a revolt of the city against those who presumed to deduce it. And it did not come from modernity's defeated: it came from its interpreters — the reporter, the mathematician, the architects, the philosopher. When the children of a discipline write that the plan is an authoritarian act, that the city is not a tree, that space is a social product, external accusers are no longer needed. In the Sixties urban planning discovers, out of its own mouth, that it does not exist as a technique that deliberates. What remains standing — eyes on the street, recurring solutions, collective memory, the right to centrality — has a single common name: politics. The revolt of the sidewalk did not ask for less governance of territory. It asked for a more honest one: capable of saying that it negotiates, instead of pretending to calculate.

6
The Contemporary Dissolution

This chapter is a confession. Not mine: the discipline's. Between the end of the twentieth century and the early 2000s, the thesis I have argued for years on the Council floor — urban planning does not exist — is not pronounced by a Sardinian regional councillor who comes from public administration. It is pronounced, almost to the letter, by one of the most celebrated architects of his time, from inside the profession itself. And when the death certificate is signed by the family doctor, not by a passerby, it must be taken seriously. That is why the chapter that follows is made almost entirely of other people's voices. My words are of little use: it is enough to listen to what they say.

A clarification of method, before we begin. In any negotiation, what one party declares against the other counts for little; what a party admits against itself counts for much. The pages that follow gather admissions of the second kind: architects, urban planners, historians of the city who — each from his own table — observe that the general plan no longer governs anything. This is not an anthology. It is a file of statements given, which I set in sequence. The reader will judge whether the sum amounts to proof.

In 1995 Rem Koolhaas publishes *The Generic City*. Two passages, at separate points in the text, say what is essential. The first: "The Generic City is what is left after large sections of urban life crossed over to cyberspace." The second: the Generic City "is the city liberated from

the captivity of center, from the straitjacket of identity." Read them again, slowly. A city without center and without identity is not, for Koolhaas, a sick city: it is the city that made itself, while the plans chased after it. The airports that look like cities, the shopping malls that look like squares, the peripheries that resemble one another on every continent. No one designed them. No plan wanted them. They came out that way, by accumulation of single decisions, and the plans confined themselves to recording them.

Koolhaas does not write deprived, does not write mutilated: he writes "liberated." Center and identity — the two pillars on which every master plan had built its geometry: the ancient core to be protected, the character to be preserved — become, in his lexicon, a captivity from which the contemporary city has emancipated itself. One may not share the choice of word. But the fact it describes can be verified by anyone who travels: the parts of the city that grow fastest are the ones no design foresaw, and they all resemble one another. The plan promised order and difference. Accumulation has produced repetition. And repetition, at least, is inhabited: people cross it, use it, make it their own without asking permission of any drawing.

In those same years Koolhaas draws the conclusion, in an essay dated 1994, under a title that is already a diagnosis: *What Ever Happened to Urbanism?* — what, indeed, has become of urban planning. It would be collected the following year in *S,M,L,XL*, the volume built with Bruce Mau. The substance says it all: urban planning is over, the craft of planning the city no longer exists. It is the observation I have been quoting for years

on the Council floor, because it coincides with what this book argues.

Seven years later, in 2002, he ups the ante with *Junkspace*: "Junkspace is what remains after modernization has run its course." Junk space: the building by-product of modernity, what gets built without anyone having thought it. It is not written by an enemy of architecture. It is not written by an executive councillor weary of plan amendments (*varianti*). It is written by an architect whom the schools study and whom clients fight over. The confession comes from inside. And it comes twice, years apart, with different words and the same idea: what is left, what remains. The Generic City is what is left; Junkspace is what remains. What remains after, always after. The project comes first only in the manuals.

Let us pause a moment, because the point is decisive. For a century the discipline had answered its critics with a simple argument: you are not of the trade. With Koolhaas the argument falls. The trade itself declares that the trade no longer exists. The plan was not defeated by an external adversary — speculation, politics, the ignorance of administrators — but by its own observation: the contemporary city produces itself at a speed, and by logics, that no preventive design intercepts. The refrain of this book, here, is not pronounced by me. It is pronounced by the profession, through the mouth of one of its most visible exponents. I merely enter it into the record.

Anyone who has sat at the tables of the inter-agency conferences (*conferenze di servizi*) knows how much an admission of this kind weighs. As long as the criticism

comes from outside, the discipline can always answer that the problem is implementation: good plans, bad executors. It is a comfortable defense, because it can never be verified — perfect implementation never obtains, and so the plan is never wrong. But when it is the profession that declares that preventive design no longer intercepts the city, the defense of implementation falls with all the rest. There is no good plan betrayed by bad executors. There is a tool that no longer grips the material. And tools that no longer grip, in the workshop, are hung on the nail. One does not go on prescribing them.

That other logics were at work, for that matter, David Harvey had been documenting since 1973, in *Social Justice and the City*. Thirty-five years later, in a 2008 essay in the *New Left Review* — entitled, precisely, *The Right to the City* — he condenses the stakes into one sentence: "The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city."

Alongside this, an idea Harvey had developed in *The Urbanization of Capital*, from 1985, in Italian *L'urbanizzazione del capitale*: capital, as it urbanizes, moves its crises through space. Crises move through space faster than any plan: they change neighborhood, change city, change continent. When the plan arrives — with its times for adoption, for observations, for approval — the crisis has already changed address. Anyone who has followed the procedure of a planning instrument knows those times one by one: the drafting, the adoption, the publication, the observations, the responses to them, the final approval. Every step is a

guarantee, and the guarantees are just. But the sum of the guarantees is a duration, and duration is exactly what the crisis does not concede.

The record has proved the analysis right. Mike Davis, in *City of Quartz*, in 1990, describes the result: the city sold off in pieces is the summary that can be drawn from it. Neil Smith, in *The New Urban Frontier*, from 1996, studies the neighborhoods that change inhabitants and the rent gap that drives them: gentrification, in his reading, is rent taking its revenge. Rent — the old acquaintance against which modern urban planning had been born, the declared enemy of every land reform — was not tamed by the plan. It outlived it. And it took its revenge precisely where the plan believed it had established order: in the rehabilitated neighborhoods that expel those who lived in them, in the recovered centers that become shop windows.

The mechanism, stripped to the bone, is this: every public decision about space produces value, and value is distributed not according to the design but according to position. The restriction that protects one area raises the price of the area next to it. The rehabilitation that improves a neighborhood makes it inaccessible to those who lived there. No bad faith is needed: the mechanics suffice. The plan, born to neutralize rent, ends up manufacturing it — and manufacturing it with a public stamp, which makes it more solid, not more just. This the critics of capital have documented on the great cases. On the small cases the mechanics are identical and the numbers more modest.

Anyone who has governed knows this dynamic from direct experience. In the Municipality and in the

Province I have seen building cycles rise and die out without any document having foreseen them, and I have seen planning instruments grow old before coming into force. Not through the incapacity of the technicians — I have worked with serious technicians — but for a structural reason: the instrument photographs, reality moves. By the time the photograph is ready, the subject has left the frame. Harvey says it of capital; I say it of the villages and provincial capitals I have administered. It is the same sentence, at different scales.

Now let us observe the responses. For urban thought did not stop before Koolhaas's confession: it went on producing ideas, some of them remarkable. But all of them — and this is the point I am concerned to demonstrate — are post-planning responses. None defends the general plan any longer. None promises any longer the overall design of the future city. Each seeks something else: the project, the process, proximity. I review them not out of erudition, but because their convergence is the proof I am after. One witness who recants may be mistaken. Five witnesses who, without having spoken to one another, recount the same scene, make a fact.

Bernardo Secchi, in *La città del ventesimo secolo*, from 2005, brings the discipline back down to earth: urban planning — he writes, in substance — is made of very concrete things, of pipes, of asphalt, of schools, not of words. Concrete things, not words: that is, projects, not plans. The pipe is laid, the asphalt is spread, the school is built; the plan is written. A few years later, in the studies conducted with Paola Viganò for Grand Paris, the two coin an image: the porous city, permeable,

letting water, people, ideas pass through. A city that lets pass, not a city that prescribes. It is already another grammar: the verb is no longer to order, it is to permit.

The difference between the two verbs is not stylistic. To order presupposes that the one who orders knows beforehand, and knows for everyone. To permit presupposes only that the one who governs keeps the openings clear and watches over the conditions. The first verb requires a science that foresees; the second requires a politics that accompanies. It took me years to understand that the second posture is not a surrender: it is the only one that holds up to the test. Those who order without being able to foresee produce paper. Those who permit knowing what they want to obtain — and negotiate the openings one by one — produce city. Secchi, from his planner's table, arrives at the same threshold starting from the pipes and the asphalt.

Stefano Boeri, in 2014, does not write a plan: he builds a manifesto-building, the Bosco Verticale — the Vertical Forest — in Milan. And he explains it like this: the forest in the city not as ornament, but as infrastructure. The result can be debated, and many have debated it. But observe the method, which is what counts here: the idea of the city is entrusted to a single building, to a site-specific project that means to set the example by contagion, by voluntary imitation. Not to a document that regulates the whole territory and binds everyone. The manifesto has taken the place of the plan; the example has taken the place of the rule.

The rule obliges, the example convinces: they are two different techniques of government, and whoever governs handles both. The rule is quick to write and

slow to enforce; the example is slow to build and quick to imitate, when it works. That an architect should entrust his idea of the city to an example rather than to a rule means that he has stopped expecting results from the second technique — or at least stopped believing that it is his to use. It is a change of field. The discipline that once wrote the rules for everyone now builds a case and waits for the contagion. From command to proposal: the trajectory is the same one this book travels from another side.

Jan Gehl, in 2010, in *Cities for People*, fixes the sequence: "First life, then spaces, then buildings — the other way around never works." It is the exact inversion of the method of the plan, which started from the buildings, then derived the space, and trusted that life would come to fill it. Gehl says: observe how people use the street, then give form to the space, and only at the end build. And he adds an image that no urban planner of the total plan would have dared: "A good city is like a good party — people stay longer than really necessary, because they are enjoying themselves." A party is not imposed by decree. It is prepared, the table is laid, and then one watches what the guests do. If they leave, the fault is not the guests'.

The image of the party, taken seriously, is less light than it seems. It contains a theory of verification: the measure of success is not the conformity of the work to the design, it is the permanence of people in the place. A plan is judged by its drawings; a party is judged at midnight, counting who has stayed. I have learned to distrust inaugurations and to look at places a year later: the squares remade by the book and left empty, the

irregular open spaces full. The book was not wrong. It was irrelevant. Life had decided elsewhere, and no drawing had consulted it.

Richard Sennett has been reasoning about urban disorder since he was little more than a beginner: *The Uses of Disorder* — his first book, from 1970 — devoted an entire volume to the theme. Almost half a century later, in 2018, in *Building and Dwelling*, he goes so far as to praise what every plan had fought: the open city is, in his proposal, a city where disorder is not a failure but a resource. Disorder as a resource: measure the distance from a century of zoning born to separate, to order, to clean up. The thesis has not been overturned: it has consolidated. What in 1970 opened the bibliography of a young scholar returns, in 2018, to the center of the work of a master. In the meantime the city around it has changed, not the idea.

And Carlos Moreno, when he formulates the fifteen-minute city, gives birth to it in a newspaper, not in a planning office: an op-ed in *La Tribune*, on 5 October 2016, entitled "La ville du quart d'heure: pour un nouveau chrono-urbanisme." The starting concept is *chrono-urbanism*: the urban planning of time before that of space. Not where things are, but how much time it takes to reach them. The Paris campaign would relaunch it in 2020; the C40 network of major cities would adopt it on 15 July of the same year; from there it would make the rounds of the city halls. But Moreno presents it not as a plan but as a right of proximity. Not a plan: he says it himself, before his critics do. It is a claim of the citizens upon the administration — to have services close by — not a design of the administration

upon the citizens.

The traditional plan reasoned by surfaces: it designated, restricted, zoned. Chrono-urbanism reasons by durations: how many minutes to the school, how many to the pharmacy, how many to work. But duration cannot be zoned. It depends on transport, on timetables, on services, on habits — matters that no plan sheet governs and that every executive councillor negotiates daily. To measure the city in minutes means, without saying so, to hand it over to urban politics: because minutes are shortened by administrative decisions, agreements, timetables, added transit runs, not by colored hatchings. Even the most fortunate of recent formulas, looked at closely, is a program of negotiation.

There were those who had understood this decades in advance. Yona Friedman had written the manifesto of *L'architecture mobile* as a self-produced text, after the tenth CIAM congress in Dubrovnik, in 1956: it circulates from 1958, passes from hand to hand, and becomes a book only in 1970. The form itself is already a program: not a treatise, a sheet that circulates. He returns to the point in 1978, with *L'architecture de survie*, whose subtitle amounts to a declaration: "Où s'invente aujourd'hui le monde de demain," where the world of tomorrow is invented today. In Italian it would arrive in 2009 as *L'architettura di sopravvivenza. Una filosofia della povertà*. And there he gives the intuition its simplest form: the architect must not design the house, he must design the manual with which people design their own house.

The manual, not the house. The rules of the game, not the moves. When I read it, as an administrator, it seemed to me the most honest definition of the craft of those who govern a territory: to prepare the conditions — the networks, the rules, the guarantees — and let the choices be made by those who will inhabit the places. Friedman was speaking of houses. It holds for villages, for neighborhoods, for entire cities. And the ideas that contradict the canon travel as that sheet traveled — outside the channels, from hand to hand — until the canon cracks.

Leonardo Benevolo, the historian who in 1963 had reconstructed *Le origini dell'urbanistica moderna*, closes the arc. His thesis is well known: modern urban planning is born when the industrial city produces inequality and an attempt is made to correct it with technique. The sequel I add myself, and it is the reading I propose of the whole trajectory: when technique becomes inequality in its turn — when the restriction enriches one owner and impoverishes another, when the *standard* is applied to those who cannot evade it and negotiated with those who can — urban planning enters its crisis. Born to correct inequality with technique, it finds itself distributing advantages and disadvantages. The circle opened a century earlier closes.

Distributing advantages and disadvantages: that is the very definition of the governance of territory. Every land-use designation is a transfer of value; every perimeter traces an inside and an outside; every derogation granted to one is an application that will arrive from another. Whoever distributes advantages and disadvantages is not doing science: he is doing

politics. And politics, to be legitimate, has its instruments — representation, discussion, declared compromise. The problem of twentieth-century urban planning is not that it distributed: it is that it distributed while calling itself technique, that is, removing the distribution from discussion. The crisis of the discipline, seen this way, is a restitution of competence: what was political returns to politics.

Let us add it up. Koolhaas declares the profession dead, in a few pages buried at the tail end of a monumental volume. The critics show that capital and rent run faster than the design. And the contemporary thinkers propose, one after another: the site-specific project, the building that sets the example, life before space, disorder as a resource, the right of proximity, the manual instead of the house. No one proposes the general plan any longer. No one promises any longer the city designed at the drawing board. All seek something else — and that something else always has the same structure, whatever one calls it: start from what is there, listen to those who inhabit, build an agreement around one piece of city at a time. Project, process, proximity are three elegant names for the same thing.

These authors do not belong to the same school: there is the designer of the great commissions, the critic who follows capital, the historian, the one who made disorder his theme, the observer of behaviors, the theorist of self-building. They do not cite the same masters, do not write in the same languages, do not frequent the same tables. Yet, set in a row, they trace the same curve: away from the general plan, toward the situated agreement. When independent witnesses

converge, the clue becomes proof. And the proof says that the discipline has not lost a battle: it has changed nature. It has ceased to be a knowledge that prescribes and has become — where it works — an art that accompanies.

I practiced this something else before finding it in books: years of territory administered piece by piece, agreement after agreement, in the Municipality, in the Province, in the Regional Council. And when I came to write about it in my turn — most recently in *Vincere in politica con la trattativa*, in 2024 — I gave it its name. It is called negotiation. The contemporary dissolution of urban planning is not a bereavement to be worked through: it is a restitution. The city returns to those who negotiate it — administrators, inhabitants, owners, businesses — that is, to those who have always truly made it, even when the plans pretended to make it. Urban planning, seen from here — from the last stretch of its arc — no longer exists even for its priests. What exists is urban politics: the art of bringing life and space to agreement, case by case.

7
The Laws We Have, the Territory We Do Not Govern

There is a paradox, and it is best to look it in the face at once. Urban planning as an autonomous science does not exist — that is my thesis — but Italian planning and landscape legislation exists, and how. It exists all too much. Eighty years of laws, decrees, consolidated acts, codes, implementing regulations. And the history of this normative production proves the thesis better than any theoretical argument. We have built a castle of rules so as never to have to truly decide. To replace political choice — who builds, where, to whose advantage, at whose expense — with the technical opinion, the automatic restriction, the procedure. This chapter recounts how we managed it.

A methodological warning, before we begin. Laws should be read as documents, not as programs. A law always says two things. It says what it prescribes, and that is the smaller part. And it says what the legislator feared, what he could not manage to govern, what he hoped to stop by writing it down: that is the greater part. I read them first as an administrator, before reading them as a regional councilor, and as an administrator one quickly learns that a planning rule always arrives on the table together with a problem that precedes it. Reread in sequence, Italy's planning laws compose a confession eighty years long. Each layer is born from the failure of the layer before, and declares it

without meaning to. That is why I proceed by stations. This is not erudition: it is evidence-gathering.

Everything begins with the Law of 17 August 1942, No. 1150, the fundamental planning law, passed by an Italy at war. Its Article 1, headed "Regulation of planning activity and its purposes," is a period document that deserves to be read in full: "The layout and building growth of inhabited centers, and urban development in general within the territory of the Kingdom, are governed by the present law. The Ministry of Public Works shall watch over planning activity, also with the aim of ensuring, in the renewal and building expansion of the cities, respect for traditional character, of promoting de-urbanization, and of checking the drift toward the cities."

Let us reread the final words. To promote *de-urbanization*. To check the drift toward the cities. The founding law of Italian urban planning is born against the city. It wants people not to go there, to the city. It is the program of a society that imagines itself immobile — peasant, orderly, spread out — on the very eve of one of the greatest population movements in the nation's history. A few years later, millions of Italians would do the exact opposite of what Article 1 wished for. And the law would stand and watch.

It is worth pausing on this gap, because it already contains everything. A law is never neutral with respect to the future: it bets on a future. Law 1150 bets on an Italy that stays where it is, and the bet is lost before the war is even over. This is not a detail; it is the structure. Italian planning law is born with a forecasting error about the movements of people, and the movements of

people command urban planning, not the other way around. When the population moves, the plan that imagined it standing still is not corrected: it is circumvented. And circumvention, not the plan, becomes the territory's effective rule.

Then there is a second clue, hidden in the grammar. The Ministry of Public Works, says Article 1, "watches over." It does not design. It does not promote. It does not choose. It watches over. From the very first line, the Italian State assigns itself, in planning matters, a position of surveillance, not of government: the territory as something to keep an eye on, not to steer. Eighty years later, that position is still ours. We have become very good at watching over. At deciding, much less.

The law, as I was saying, would stand and watch. For twenty years. Law 1150 provided for the *master plan* as the general instrument of regulation, but for two decades it remained almost unapplied: municipalities did not draw up the plans, and where they did, reconstruction and then the building boom ran faster than the procedures. Here is the thesis in normative form: the law existed, the governance of territory did not. Urban planning existed in the Official Gazette and did not exist on the ground.

The peripheries of those years were not drawn by a plan: they were drawn by the demand for housing, and the plan, where it arrived, came afterward, to take note. Let us say it plainly: taking note is not governing. It is the difference between the one who holds the helm and the one who keeps the logbook. The logbook is useful, at times indispensable. But it does not set the course.

Why did the municipalities not draw up plans? Those who have never administered answer: out of negligence. Those who have administered know the answer is more uncomfortable. A master plan is costly, it is slow, and above all it produces certain enemies in exchange for uncertain benefits. The moment it draws a line, the plan creates one satisfied owner and one dissatisfied; and the dissatisfied one votes, protests, appeals. Not making the plan, for a mayor of those years, was not laziness: it was a calculation. The law asked municipalities to perform the most onerous political act in existence — distributing value and taking value away with the drawing of a zone — without giving them either the means or the protection to do it. The outcome was written from the start.

The legislator tries again. First with the Law of 18 April 1962, No. 167, the law of the zone plans for low-cost public housing: the idea that the public authority should procure the land and build the workers' city upon it. It is a serious idea, and it should be acknowledged as such: for once the public sector does not confine itself to regulating what others do, it goes to work on its own account — it acquires the land, decides, builds. But it remains a special instrument, for a special kind of housing, inside a system that goes on working in another way: the ordinary city is made elsewhere, under other rules. This too is a lesson: hold on to it. When the public sector truly wants to build the city, it must have the land at its disposal. When it confines itself to regulating other people's land, it is in fact negotiating.

Then, with the Law of 6 August 1967, No. 765 — we all call it the *legge ponte*, the "bridge law," because it was

meant to ferry us toward an organic reform that never arrived: the bridge was left without a far bank. It is its Article 17 that introduces into the old Law 1150 the Article 41-quinquies, which places limits on building in municipalities lacking a master plan or a building program. One no longer builds freely outside inhabited centers without a planning instrument. It has every appearance of the plan's victory. It is the beginning of another story.

What really changed? Before the bridge law, the plan was a project: the design of how the municipality intended to grow. Afterward, the plan becomes above all a condition: the paper one must have in order to build. The shift seems minimal and it is enormous. A project is judged on its merits, on the city it designs. A condition is judged on its existence: either it is there or it is not. From then on, the question put to municipalities is no longer what city they have conceived, but whether they have the instrument. From an end, the plan becomes a prerequisite. It is the first great victory of procedure over choice, and it goes unnoticed, because it takes the form of a strengthening of the plan.

The same Article 41-quinquies, in its eighth and ninth paragraphs, refers the definition of the *standards* to a ministerial decree: it will be the Decree of 2 April 1968, No. 1444, which from its very title declares itself the child of the bridge law. In all municipalities — says the rule — "non-derogable limits of building density, of height, of distance between buildings must be observed," along with maximum ratios between spaces for residential settlement and public spaces, green areas, parking, "defined for homogeneous territorial zones, by

decree of the Minister." Article 41-sexies, likewise introduced by the bridge law, adds parking spaces in new buildings. Square meters per inhabitant, distances, heights: the city reduced to a table.

The standard is a great intuition and at the same time a great renunciation. A great intuition, because it guarantees a minimum to everyone: the green space, the school, the parking lot no longer depend on the builder's benevolence. That is no small thing. It is perhaps the most concrete piece of equality that Italian planning law has ever produced: it holds for the affluent neighborhood and for the poor one, for the large municipality and for the small, without distinctions and without anyone needing to ask.

A great renunciation, because it substitutes measurement for choice. The ministerial decree decides once and for all, for every municipality in Italy, how much green space belongs to each inhabitant — and from that moment no municipal council need ever again ask itself what city it wants. It is enough to respect the numbers. I have seen this mechanism at work from the inside: the discussion about the city one would want lasts a few minutes; the verification of compliance with the standards lasts months. Not because today's administrators are worth less than yesterday's, but because the system rewards the second activity and demands no account of the first. Compliance is measurable, defensible in court, equal for all. Vision is not. And what is not measurable, in a system of procedures, simply ceases to be required.

And since the numbers, in reality, often do not add up, there is born in those same years the creature that

will dominate the following half century: the *derogation*. "Non-derogable" limits that Italy would learn to derogate from by law. Weigh the oxymoron, for it is not a lexical accident. A limit that can be derogated from is a rule. A non-derogable limit that gets derogated from is something else: it is the declaration that the rule holds until an interest strong enough presses against it, and that the measure of that strength is written nowhere. The derogation does not correct the system of standards: it completes it. The table for those who have no voice, negotiation for those who do. I will return to this point further on, because it is the heart of the chapter.

Then the legislator attempts a thrust at the most delicate point: property. The Law of 28 January 1977, No. 10 — the Bucalossi law — replaces the building license with the *concession* to build, granted for a fee. The underlying idea is to separate the *ius aedificandi* from ownership of the land: building is not a right inherent in owning, it is a faculty that public power concedes, and one pays for it. It is the most conceptually radical move of the entire story. If the right to build descends not from property but from public concession, then the building value of land is created by the community — with its decision to make an area buildable — and to the community it can return. It would be the premise of an authentic public urban planning: the plan no longer as a limit on the rights of others, but as the act that generates those rights.

It lasts three years. The Constitutional Court, with judgment No. 5 of 1980 — decided on 25 January, filed on the 30th — cuts the framework down to size: "the

right to build continues to inhere in ownership and in the other situations that include the entitlement to build." The word had changed; the substance goes back to what it was before. The most ambitious attempt to give urban planning an autonomous foundation closes before a judge.

I am interested in the outcome, but also in the place of the outcome. Three years: that is how long the only Italian experiment in urban planning as an original power lasted. And its fate was not decided in Parliament, nor in municipal councils, nor in the debate among planners: it was decided in a constitutionality proceeding, on the terrain of property. In one move, two-thirds of my thesis. Urban planning is not an autonomous science, because its founding question — to whom does the value created by the plan belong — is a question of law and of economics, not of urban design. And it is not an effective power, because when it tried to become one, a judgment was enough to bring it back into line. After that January of 1980 the legislator never again attempted a thrust of that magnitude. It began to skirt the knot, by the route we shall see: the restriction.

Having taken note that it cannot govern, the State moves to restricting. The Law of 8 August 1985, No. 431 — the Galasso law, converting Decree-Law No. 312 of the same year — places under landscape restriction, directly by force of law, "the coastal territories included within a strip 300 meters deep from the shoreline, including for land elevated above the sea." Three hundred meters, the same at Portofino and in the marsh.

Mark the mechanism, for it is here that the law speaks most clearly. The restriction *ope legis* — by direct

effect of the law, without any measure assessing the individual place — is the confession that the plans did not work. If planning had protected the coasts, there would be no need for a line drawn by Parliament, identical for the whole peninsula, indifferent to places. The automatic restriction is the exact opposite of the plan: the plan presupposes knowledge of the territory and the distinction between one place and another; the three-hundred-meter strip presupposes that this distinction can no longer be trusted. The Galasso law saved whole stretches of the Italian coastline — let it be said — but it saved them by renouncing urban planning, not by applying it: by freezing, not by governing.

There is a word for this way of legislating: distrust. Distrust of the municipalities, which had not made the plans or had made them complaisant. Distrust of the regions. Distrust, at bottom, of territorial politics as such. The distrust may have had its reasons; but it has a cost that no one has ever entered in the accounts, and it is the end of responsibility. Whoever is stripped of power also stops answering for it. Before an intact coast, after 1985, no administrator can say he chose it; before a compromised coast, no one has to explain why. The credit and the blame belong to the restriction — that is, to no one. Automatic protection protects places and, in the same movement, dissolves political responsibility for them.

The synthesis arrives with Legislative Decree of 22 January 2004, No. 42, which everyone calls the Urbani Code. Article 131 fixes the notion: "Landscape means the territory expressive of identity, whose character derives from the action of natural and human factors and from

their interrelations." Article 135 requires that "the State and the regions shall ensure that the entire territory is adequately known, safeguarded, planned and managed by reason of the different values expressed by the different contexts that constitute it." The instrument is the landscape plans, drawn up jointly by the Ministry and the regions.

The Galasso law's three-hundred-meter restriction still lives there, in Article 142, among the areas protected by law: the line drawn in 1985 has become a permanent institution. And the definition in Article 131 deserves respect: landscape not as a postcard, but as territory expressive of identity, the product of the joint action of nature and man. Anyone who has ever administered a territory recognizes something true in that formula. The Code is the most refined edifice that Italian law has ever dedicated to the territory.

And it is, once again, an edifice of protection: to know, to safeguard, to restrict. The Code's verbs are verbs of custody. Even when Article 135 says "planned," the planning it has in mind is in the service of the values to be safeguarded, not of the transformations to be chosen. To transform, to decide where people's lives are to find room — this the Code does not say, because it is not its task. But no one says it anymore. The void the Code leaves behind it — legitimately: every law has its object — has been filled by nothing else. Custody has found its text. Government has not.

Alongside the Code stands the other pillar, the Decree of the President of the Republic of 6 June 2001, No. 380, the Consolidated Building Act. It is enough to list its current permitting regimes: the free building

activity of Article 6; the *CILA*, the certified notice of commencement of works, of Article 6-bis, a residual regime with respect to the other authorizations; the building permit of Article 10; the *SCIA* of Article 22; the SCIA in lieu of the permit of Article 23. Five doors into the same construction site, and choosing the right door is itself an expert's task.

"The interested party transmits to the municipal administration the project documents and the notice of commencement of works certified by a qualified technician": thus Article 6-bis. The sentence seems innocuous and is instead a portrait. The citizen no longer encounters a public choice about the city: he encounters a labyrinth of authorizations, and a technician who accompanies him. The fundamental relationship is no longer between the inhabitant and his political community, which decides how to grow; it is between the client and the professional who certifies, declares, attests. And then the verb: transmits. Not asks. In the regimes of notice and notification, the municipality concedes nothing: it receives, takes note, retains the power to check afterward. Even the last threshold — the moment when public power looked at the project before it became a construction site — retreats.

Those who administer see this system from a particular vantage point. The municipal technical offices, which in theory would be the operational arm of the plan, spend the greater part of their time classifying files: this one is free activity, this one is a CILA, this one requires the permit. Litigation almost never turns on what it would be right to build in a place; it turns on

which authorization was needed. And local politics adapts: a municipal planning department is measured by its response times and by its backlog of files. Serious indicators; I do not despise them. But none of them says a word about the city that is being made in the meantime.

The latest link, for now, dates from the day before yesterday. Decree-Law of 29 May 2024, No. 69, converted with amendments by the Law of 24 July 2024, No. 105, is titled "Urgent provisions on building and planning simplification": it is what public debate calls the *salva-casa*, the "home-saver" decree. It intervenes on the Consolidated Act: the legitimate status of buildings, construction tolerances graduated from 2 up to 6 percent according to surface area, changes of use, simplified regularization of partial non-conformities, recovery of attic spaces.

The graduated tolerances are the real novelty. We are no longer facing the classic regularization, the extraordinary one-off act that resets the counter to zero: we are facing the physiology of non-conformity, incorporated permanently into the Consolidated Act. Up to a certain percentage, the deviation from the design is not an irregularity to be regularized: it simply does not count. Eighty years after the fundamental law, the legislator no longer regulates the building growth of inhabited centers: it regulates the regularization of what has already been badly built. The arc is complete. We set out to check the drift toward the cities; we end up assigning percentages to non-conformity. Article 1 of 1942 wanted to govern the movement of a people; the rule of 2024 measures the gap between the filed design

and the wall that has gone up. From the nation to the centimeter.

Here the argument reaches its pivot — those who know the negotiation I wrote about in *Vincere in politica con la trattativa* will recognize the point. Every amnesty and every derogation is a negotiation. It is one in substance: there is a private interest pressing, a public interest resisting, a meeting point that gets found. So far, nothing scandalous. Negotiation is the normal form of political decision, and whoever despises it in the name of the purity of the plan has understood neither negotiation nor the plan.

But it is a negotiation done badly: real bargaining, yet opaque, without declared objective criteria, case by case but without transparency about the case by case. A negotiation worthy of the name demands that the parties be recognizable, that the interests be declared, that the criteria of the exchange be fixed in advance and hold for everyone. The Italian planning derogation reverses every requirement. The parties sit at no table: the private party builds, or builds non-conformingly, and waits. The public party does not declare which interest it is ceding, nor in exchange for what. And the price is not agreed beforehand: the law fixes it after the fact, the same for the cunning and for the unlucky. It is the reverse of principled negotiation: the outcome is bargained over without declaring the interests at stake. A negotiation without a table, without declared parties and without minutes — but with a price, that much is certain, always paid by someone.

The gravest defect is the temporal asymmetry. In a true negotiation the exchange precedes the

performance: first the agreement, then the execution. In regularization the order is reversed: first one performs, then one negotiates — and whoever has already built negotiates from a position that no shrewd negotiator would ever concede to the other side, because the fait accompli is the strongest of arguments. Every regularization teaches that the fait accompli pays; and every generation of faits accomplis prepares the next regularization. This circle cannot be closed by administrative means. It closes only by restoring to public decision the moment that properly belongs to it: before, not after.

And the derogation is also a logical proof, the simplest of all. If the plan governed, there would be no need to derogate from it each time. The fact that every legislative season produces its own safety valve — amnesty, regularization, tolerance, salva-casa — demonstrates that the pressure of real life on the plan is constant, and that the plan, alone, cannot bear it. This is not an anomaly to be blamed on the national character: it is the consequence of a system that asks of the abstract rule what only the concrete decision can give. Where decision is missing, the pressure finds its road anyway. The safety valve is the technical name of that road.

I am not the only one to have seen it, and the planners saw it first. Federico Oliva, opening the new series of the journal *Urbanistica* in 2013, spoke of the "growing marginalization that planning is undergoing in Italian society." Marginalization: the word is his, a man of the trade, not a politician in polemic. And it is a word chosen with care. Not crisis, which supposes an illness

one can recover from; not attack, which supposes an enemy to be repelled. Marginalization: the slipping toward the margins of a practice that society has ceased to consider central. Italian society has stopped asking for plans; it asks for building authorizations, it asks for regularizations, it asks for certainties about the individual property. And legislation has adapted: fewer and fewer rules on how to transform, more and more rules on how to restrict and how to regularize.

Here, then, is the thesis, in the form that belongs to this chapter: urban planning does not exist even where planning law abounds. Indeed: it abounds precisely because urban planning does not exist. Eighty years of normative production are not the proof of a strong discipline: they are the stratigraphy of a stand-in. Every layer of the castle — the standard, the restriction, the code, the authorization, the regularization — was added to stem the collapse of the layer beneath, and every layer shifted a piece of decision from politics to procedure. The result is a legislation that does not plan but restricts, that does not choose but authorizes, that does not govern but ratifies. The territory, meanwhile, has made itself: the law chased it with protection and caught up with it with regularization.

And if this holds for the State, it holds doubly for my island. Sardinia has made planning matters a specialty of its own: its own legislation, its own plans, its own litigation, and a history — which I have lived from the inside, year by year — in which all the mechanisms described in this chapter are found concentrated and carried to the extreme. The standard and the derogation, the restriction and the regularization, the

protection that freezes and the pressure that leaps over: every figure in the national repertoire has, in our land, its accentuated version. To the Sardinian castle of rules, and to what it reveals, an appendix at the end of this book is devoted.

8

What Remains, If Urban Planning Does Not Exist. The Final Proposal

I have come to the end. It is time to sum up. I have argued a clear-cut thesis: urban planning does not exist — not as an autonomous science, not as an effective power; only bargaining exists. The reader who has followed me this far no longer needs the statement: they have seen the evidence. They have seen treatises and plans promise a science and deliver, every time, the portrait of their own age — from Vitruvius to Koolhaas, children of economics, of demography, of politics, never of a pure body of knowledge. They have seen reality walk ahead and the plan trail behind, when it came at all. And in every age and in every law they have found what actually holds the territory together: bargaining, the agreement reached case by case among those who inhabit it, those who own it, those who administer it. The instruments change name from one season to the next; the fact remains one and the same. On this fact, documented stage after stage, I build the proposal.

What remains, then, for those who must govern? Politics remains. Politics as the art of making incompatible interests compatible: it is the thesis that runs through everything I have written, from *La democrazia rapita* to *Scacco matto*, from *Vincere in politica con la trattativa* to *Il principe della Repubblica*. There is no such thing as the power that decides alone.

There is only the power that negotiates.

I verified it in my years in administration, in city hall as in the Province. I never signed an act of governance of territory that was not, in the final analysis, an agreement — with a municipality, with a private party, with another institution, with a community asking to be heard. I do not say it with regret. I say it as one states a law of physics. The act reached signature when the agreement was there; when the agreement was lacking, the act stood still, and no plan provision was enough to set it in motion. Anyone who has governed knows it: paper moves nothing by itself. What moves things are the people who have recognized themselves in what the paper says.

This is not only experience: it is theory. Herbert Simon showed that the rationality of the decision-maker is bounded — no one possesses all the information, no one can calculate all the consequences of their own choices. It holds for the individual and it holds, all the more, for the administration: the office that drafts a plan knows one part of the territory, the part that maps and site inspections deliver to it; the rest — the intentions of owners, the projects of businesses, the children who will or will not be born — remains outside its field of vision. And I add, from experience more than from doctrine: the decision-maker does not seek the optimum, which he cannot know; he seeks what suffices, the solution that holds. The plan that demands the optimum on an urban scale demands a knowledge that no one possesses.

Charles Lindblom described the way administrations actually decide: *muddling through*, proceeding by

successive adjustments, one step at a time, correcting along the way. This is not a degeneration of decision-making: it is its natural form. The alternative — the calculation that starts from ends, examines all means and chooses the best — exists in textbooks, not in offices. In offices one starts from what is there, changes a little at a time, observes the effect, corrects. Every administrator who has stayed in office more than a year recognizes in this description their own working day.

If they are right — and they are right — the total plan was not merely wishful thinking on the political level. It was impossible on the level of knowledge. No planner, however honest and cultivated, can know today what a city will want to be in twenty years. The failure this book has recounted does not stem from the poor quality of planners: it stems from the nature of things. And the observation, which seems to take away, in fact gives. It takes away the alibi of the perfect plan to wait for; it gives the task, more modest and more serious, of deciding the next step well. Bounded rationality is not a condemnation: it is the condition within which politics has always worked. Those who accept it stop promising the impossible and begin to deliver the possible.

From this observation three choices follow. Not three utopias: three decisions within the reach of a Regional Council, of a regional executive, of a mayor. The first: a few non-negotiable rules. Whoever has administered a protected territory knows the paradox of the universal restriction well: if everything is restricted, nothing is protected. The restriction extended to everything does not protect everything — it produces the universal

derogation, because life keeps pressing and always finds the crack. It is the lesson met at every stage: the rule that demands too much obtains little.

The history recounted in the Appendix proves it: of fourteen landscape plans covering a single region, thirteen fell before the courts. Protection that claims to be everywhere ends up being nowhere. There is a simple reason, and anyone who has signed permits and denials knows it: the rule that forbids everything obliges the administration to choose, every day, which prohibitions actually to enforce, and that daily choice — silent, case by case — is itself a negotiation, but without rules and without witnesses. The universal restriction does not eliminate negotiation: it hides it. Better to reverse the method: forbid little, and enforce everything that is forbidden.

A few rules, then, but rules of stone. Ian McHarg, who in 1969 titled his book *Design with Nature*, had already indicated them in substance: before drawing, look at where the water flows, where the soil gives way, where the land has already spoken. For an island like the one I administer, the rules of stone are three. Zero land consumption where there is risk: no building where the water has already shown that it means to pass. Water as a limit: an island where water is scarce and irregular cannot plan as if it were abundant. The coastal strip as a common good: to be guarded as a heritage, not renegotiated with every legislature.

Note: none of the three is a rule of urban planning. The first is hydraulic, the second climatic, the third political in the proper sense — it establishes what belongs to everyone. None asks of urban planning what

urban planning cannot give; all require the courage that is so often lacking, the courage to say no once and for all instead of saying "yes and no" to every application. The rule of stone has an advantage that the diffuse restriction will never have: it is not up for negotiation. And precisely because it is not up for negotiation, it frees negotiation on everything else. Those who negotiate knowing that three boundaries are untouchable negotiate better: the field is defined, and energies concentrate where agreement is possible.

The second choice: projects in place of general plans. The twenty-year master plan — the model that Astengo brought to its technical perfection — presupposes exactly what Simon and Lindblom refuted: that the future can be known and arranged. Better a few strategic projects, concrete ones, with three mandatory attributes: the deadlines, the money, the people responsible. A project without a deadline is a wish; a project without funding is a promise; a project without a person responsible is an alibi.

The three attributes are not technical ornaments: they are the difference between government and its representation. Time forces choice, because what has no deadline has no priority. Money forces truth, because funding is found only by taking away elsewhere, and taking away elsewhere means declaring what matters most. The person responsible forces accountability, because a first and last name can be summoned, questioned, replaced — a plan cannot. I have seen elegant programming documents age untouched on the shelves; they were elegant precisely because they committed no one. The project with the three attributes

is laborious to write and difficult to sign. That is why it works.

Renzo Piano gave this work an exact name: the *rammendo*, the mending. Stitching the peripheries back together, repairing what exists, completing the unfinished. The *rammendo* is more difficult than expansion — it asks for more intelligence than concrete, more patience than cranes — but it is the only work possible in a land that is losing inhabitants and has already built far more than it inhabits. Expansion could afford error: there was space, there was demand, time covered the smudges. The *rammendo* cannot. It works on a fabric that exists, inhabited by people who remember; every wrong stitch shows, every right stitch is felt. That is why the *rammendo* is, even before being a technique, a school of listening.

How does one begin? Jan Gehl, in Copenhagen, answered with a simplicity that still disarms: start from a bench. Observe where people sit, where they walk, where they stop to talk, and build from there. De Carlo had said the same thing in other words: the city must be designed with the people, not for the people. The preposition changes everything. To design for the people is still the gesture of the expert who knows; to design with the people is the gesture of the politician who listens.

And the project — unlike the plan — allows it: it has a scale that people can see, a worksite they can follow, a result for which they can hold a flesh-and-blood person to account. Gehl's bench is not a whim: it is a method of knowledge. One governs what one observes, not what one presumes. The general plan presumes: it projects

inhabitants, hypothesizes needs, imagines flows. The project observes: it counts those who pass, listens to those who stay, measures what happens. Between presuming and observing runs the whole distance measured in the pages that precede.

The third choice is the one most my own: to give institutions to negotiation. Patsy Healey, in *Collaborative Planning*, in 1997, argued that planning is a communicative process: not a design descending from above, but a conversation that builds its outcome as it unfolds. Luigi Bobbio devoted his studies to public deliberation and to its essential condition: there must be places where negotiation is public, traceable, fair. This is the decisive point. Negotiation, in the governance of territory, happens anyway — this book has done nothing but document it. The only real alternative is between negotiation that takes place in visible places, with rules and minutes, and negotiation that takes place where no one sees. To give institutions to negotiation means choosing the former.

What does it mean, concretely? Not the closed table where the mayor and the developer come to terms sheltered from view, but the open conference where the private party brings its resources and the public brings its rights: the schools, the rent-controlled housing, the public spaces. The exchange is the same — private benefits against collective benefits — but its nature changes: from favor to contract. A contract can be read, discussed, improved; a favor can only be suspected. What today is done under the modest name of *derogation* must be done under the honest name of negotiation: the content may be the same, the dignity is

opposite — and opposite are the cities that are born of it.

The method already exists, and I described it in *Vincere in politica con la trattativa*: it is principled negotiation. I did not invent it: it comes from the studies of Fisher and Ury, who in 1981 published *Getting to Yes* — in Italy, *L'arte del negoziato* — within the work of the Harvard Negotiation Project. I put it to the test where those scholars had not imagined it: in council chambers, in conferences between public bodies, at the tables where the territory is actually decided. And I found that it holds.

The first principle: the discussion is about interests, not positions. Not the claim to a building volume against the refusal to grant it, but the question of what the business, the municipality, the inhabitants actually need — and often one discovers that the answers do not coincide with the initial demands. The position is the surface; the interest is the aquifer. Two positions may exclude each other while the interests that drive them can coexist, provided someone takes the trouble to dig. The second principle is its complement: separate the people from the problem. In the governance of territory people know one another, meet again, live in the same villages: whoever humiliates his counterpart today will find him across the table tomorrow. The problem, on the other hand, must be attacked without ceremony.

Then: invent many options before deciding, separating invention from decision. The best agreement rarely coincides with the first proposal to reach the table; but as long as every idea is judged the instant it is born, no one dares to propose new ones. First broaden,

then choose. And one chooses by measuring solutions against objective criteria — costs, needs, data — and not against the relative strength of the parties: the parties must not believe, but recognize, what is fair. Finally, each party must know its own best alternative to a negotiated agreement: must know what happens if the table collapses. Those who know it negotiate serenely; those who do not sign out of fear or break off out of pride, and both outcomes cost the territory more than any compromise.

Two devices complete the repertoire. The first is the "golden bridge": helping the other side save face, letting them write their own victory speech. In the governance of territory, winning by humiliation serves nothing: an agreement signed by a defeated party is an agreement that someone will work to undo. The second is the "ripe apple": leading one step at a time, through successive partial agreements, with clarity and with pedantry. One does not ask the tree for unripe fruit; one prepares the ground, waits, picks when the fruit comes away by itself. Agreements over territory ripen this way: one set of minutes after another, one fixed point after another, until the final step appears natural to everyone.

And when the parties are many — and this is the normal case with territory: the municipality, the Region, the owners, the businesses, the committees — the repertoire offers the instrument I consider the point of arrival of the journey made thus far: the single-text mediation procedure. A third party, with no interests at stake, listens to all the parties and gathers the interests of each. Then it unifies them in one text: not a diplomatic synthesis, but a proposal that attempts to

give every interest the greatest satisfaction compatible with the others. The text circulates, is corrected, circulates again. In the end, the decision is a yes or a no to the single text — not to a thousand amendments, not to packages that can be taken apart: to the text as a whole.

Now imagine this procedure inside the open conference I have described. The mediator gathers the interests: the business asking for firm timelines, the municipality asking for public works and housing, the inhabitants asking not to lose what makes their neighborhood livable. He writes them down, makes them public, composes them into a text that everyone can read. Objections improve the text instead of sinking the table, because no one is defending their own position any longer: everyone is working on the same sheet of paper. And the final yes or no, pronounced in public and entered in the minutes, is a political act in the full sense: visible, attributable, debatable. This is the institution that is missing. Not a new plan: a procedure. This is the politics of urban planning as I understand it — not the science that does not exist, but the negotiation that does, conducted, however, in the light, with rules, before witnesses.

A method, however, is worth only as much as those who practice it. In *Il principe della Repubblica* I indicated the three virtues of the politician: patience, intelligence, humility. They are, to the letter, the virtues of the urban negotiator. Patience, because agreements over territory ripen on the apple's schedule, not on the news cycle's. Intelligence, because finding the interests beneath the positions is a work of excavation, not of force. Humility,

because whoever enters a conference convinced of already knowing the outcome has already broken the table, even while remaining seated.

And there is the question of time, which in the same book I distinguished with the words of the Greeks: *Chronos*, measurable duration, and *Kairos*, the opportune moment. The plan knows only *Chronos*: deadlines, ten-year horizons, implementation timetables. Negotiation lives on *Kairos*: there is a moment when an agreement is possible — before, it was not; after, it will no longer be — and recognizing it is the part of the craft that no manual teaches. The urban negotiator must possess both times: the discipline of *Chronos* to keep the process standing, the instinct of *Kairos* to close when the apple is ripe. And he must possess what I have called the "pedantry of democracy": rigor, shared rules, care for details. The minutes well written, the meeting notice sent to everyone, the deadline respected. It looks like bureaucracy: it is its opposite. It is what makes negotiation an institution, and not a conversation among the powerful.

Two warnings accompany the proposal. Marc Augé gave the name *non-places* to the spaces born of the loss of relations; and non-places multiply precisely where negotiation has been missing, where the territory has been filled without being negotiated with anyone. Zygmunt Bauman described a *liquid modernity*, in which no social form lasts long enough to consolidate: one more reason, not one less, to give negotiation stable institutions, capable of conferring durable form on agreements that are by nature changeable. I put it this way: the plan does not govern because it does not listen.

And a city that is not listened to takes its revenge — it empties, it scatters, it builds itself on its own, and badly.

The case examined in the Appendix has, for that matter, already written this lesson in its own official record. A general planning law amended many times and never replaced; organic reforms that were never born; and the reasons put in writing by the very minister who had led the work: the votes were lacking, the political will to go forward was lacking. This is not an accident: it is a confirmation. The perfect organic law does not arrive because it does not exist; what exist are the possible agreements, and when agreement is lacking not even the law is born. Whoever waits for the right plan in order to govern will never govern. Whoever seeks the possible agreement has already begun to govern.

I close with Italo Calvino, who in *Invisible Cities* left the sentence every planner should keep on their desk: "The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand". It does not tell it: it contains it. It does not declare it in a document: it carries it written in its walls, in its street layouts, in the names of its streets, in the habits of those who cross it. It is the exact opposite of the total plan, which presumes to dictate the future to a city without having asked it for its past. The cities I know best — the provincial capitals as much as the villages of the interior — have ancient, deep lines: whoever ignores them draws on a void. Whoever wants to govern them must first know how to read them, as one reads a hand — with patience, up close, without the presumption of rewriting them.

Urban planning does not exist. The city exists. There exist the inhabitants who make it every day, the mayors who administer it, the interests that clash within it and that can, if someone helps them, be reconciled. The order to come — because an order will always be needed — will not be the design of an expert nor the decree of a power: it will be an agreement. A renewable agreement, because generations change and with them their needs; a demanding agreement, because the few rules of stone are not to be touched. And that agreement will be made by politics, if politics goes back to doing its job to the very end: negotiating, mediating, deciding, and answering before the people.

Appendix

Endemic Laws: The Case of Sardinia

"Endemic," in biology, is said of a species that lives in one place only and nowhere else. Sardinia is full of them: plants, amphibians, words. And laws. There exist on the island normative species that grow nowhere else, born of a special legal soil: the Statute — Constitutional Law No. 3 of 26 February 1948 — which, at Article 3, letter f), assigns to the Region primary legislative power in the matter of "building and urban planning." Two dry words, inside a list. From those two words everything follows: Sardinia does not apply the urban planning of others, it legislates its own, and it has been doing so for almost eighty years.

It is worth pausing a moment on what *primary legislative power* is, because the rest of the appendix rests there. It is not a delegation, not a competence of detail inside frames written by others: it is the power to write the rule from the beginning, subject to the limits, first of all, of the Constitution and — we shall see how much this clause weighs — of the fundamental norms of the State's economic and social reforms. The ordinary Regions move within national framework laws; Sardinia, on paper, manufactures its own frame. And it is precisely here, where urban planning has more formal power than anywhere else, that one sees best how little it exists. If the thesis of this book has a testing ground, it is this.

I speak of things I have handled. I handled them as a member of the city government in Nuoro, then as president of the Province — which in the regional design was the body responsible for the *provincial urban plan* — and finally at the head of the Union of Sardinian Provinces. The endemic laws I speak of I did not study in textbooks: I applied them, endured them, negotiated them. I know how they are born and I know how they die. And above all I know what happens in the long time that passes between their birth and their death: the territory happens, and it does not wait.

It is a difference of gaze that I ask the reader to hold firm. Whoever looks at a law from the side of those who write it sees articles, paragraphs, headings. Whoever looks at it from the side of those who apply it sees open files, opinions that do not arrive, offices asking for supplementary documents, citizens waiting for an answer and, in the meantime, deciding on their own. The law has its times; the territory has others. A stretch of countryside is abandoned, a house is closed up, a building site stops or starts anyway: all this occurs while the norm awaits its plan, the plan awaits its opinion, the opinion awaits its judge. This gap — between the time of the rule and the time of things — is the true subject of the appendix.

The rootstock of the family is Regional Law No. 45 of 22 December 1989, "Norms for the Use and Protection of the Regional Territory." It is Sardinia's general urban planning law. Its design is limpid, almost didactic: at the top, the regional directives for the territory; then the areas of landscape protection, with their territorial landscape plans (PTP); then the *provincial urban plan*;

finally the *municipal urban plan*. An orderly cascade of plans, from the general to the particular. On paper, a system.

That cascade is the most faithful translation I know of the idea of urban planning as a science. Each plan descends from the one above and orders the one below; each scale has its instrument; no place remains uncovered, no decision remains without a frame. If urban planning existed as an autonomous, ordering body of knowledge, this is how it would work: a deduction running downward, from the regional directives to the single lot. Law 45 of 1989 is the design of that world. And this is why its history is instructive: because that world, when put to the test, never came to be. Thirty-seven years later, the law is still there — in force, continually amended, never replaced. Not because it worked: because no one has managed to agree on what to put in its place. I shall come back to this.

The second step of the cascade was also the first to fall. The territorial landscape plans provided for by the law were drafted and approved: fourteen, covering the entire regional territory. Thirteen were annulled by the courts — seven by decrees of enforcement in 1998, in extraordinary appeal proceedings before the Head of State, upon prior opinion of the Council of State; the other six by the Regional Administrative Court (TAR) of Sardinia, with judgments Nos. 1203 through 1208 of 2003. The Constitutional Court, reconstructing the affair in Judgment No. 51 of 2006, fixed it in a few words: plans "thirteen of which, out of the overall number of fourteen for the entire regional territory, annulled by the Regional Administrative Tribunal of Sardinia or, in

extraordinary appeal proceedings, by the Head of State."

The one plan left standing was that of the Sinis peninsula. Thirteen plans out of fourteen. Not a stumble: a massacre. An instrument born to give the territory certainty produced, as its first fruit, litigation; and litigation, as its outcome, a void. The dates weigh: plans born of a law of 1989, fallen between 1998 and 2003. More than a decade of technical and administrative work — draftings, adoptions, approvals — resolved into a series of annulments. The cascade system lost its second step almost entirely, and lost it not by political choice but by judicial process: no assembly ever voted to abandon landscape planning; simply, one day, the plans were no longer there.

Those who governed in those years — I was among them — found themselves administering with a law in force and its plans nonexistent. The condition was this: the norm prescribes an instrument, the instrument is gone, the territory keeps asking for answers. Every file becomes a case; every case, an interpretation; every interpretation, a risk. And the local administrator, who neither wrote the law nor annulled the plans, remains the only visible figure on the scene: it is from him that the citizen demands an account of a void that others produced elsewhere.

A system of landscape planning built by law and demolished by judgment: here is the first, wholly Sardinian way in which urban planning does not exist — it exists until a judge annuls it. And a body of knowledge that lives hanging on the outcome of an appeal is not a knowledge that governs: it is a litigating position. No discipline deserving the name of science depends, for its

own validity, on a panel of judges; geology does not await judgments to say where a fault line runs. Urban planning does. And this, more than any theoretical argument, tells us of what nature it is: not knowledge that imposes itself, but a claim that defends itself.

Into the void left by the annulments moved the Soru executive. Regional Law No. 8 of 25 November 2004 — the "Salvacoste" coastal-protection law — prohibited new works in the "coastal territories included in the strip within 2,000 meters of the sea's shoreline," 500 in the smaller islands, until the approval of the regional landscape plan and in any case for no more than eighteen months. It was, in substance, a suspension: stopping the game until its rules could be rewritten. The national Government challenged it.

The Constitutional Court, in the same Judgment No. 51 of 2006, declared the challenge inadmissible, recognizing that Sardinia's primary competence in building and urban planning includes — through Article 6 of Presidential Decree No. 480 of 1975 — the drafting and approval of landscape plans as well. It was a rare moment: the endemic law that holds up before the judge of laws. Rare, and for that reason revealing. When the Region won, it won not in the name of an urban planning doctrine but of a distribution of competences: the Court did not say that that discipline of the territory was good, it said that the Region was entitled to give it to itself. Even the victory, looked at closely, is a negotiating victory — the confirmation of a position at the table, not of a content.

On that basis came the Regional Landscape Plan (PPR), approved by Resolution of the Regional Executive

No. 36/7 of 5 September 2006, limited to the first homogeneous area: the coastal zone. I want to say clearly something that the polemics of those years have often covered up: the merit of that plan against coastal subdivision schemes is real. It stopped a model that was consuming the island's most contested good. Anyone who has governed a territory knows that there are moments when the only serious choice is to close; that was one of those moments.

Let me add a negotiator's consideration. Closing is a move. It suspends the retail bargaining — file by file, subdivision by subdivision — and replaces it with a general rule. It is negotiation brought to the right level: no longer a thousand small tables, where organized interest almost always prevails over diffuse interest, but a single table, public, where the balance of power is reversed. The Salvacoste first and the 2006 plan afterward were this: a general renegotiation of the relationship between the island and its coast. That the operation succeeded confirms the thesis of this book, it does not refute it: what succeeded was not the science of plans, it was politics, which for once had the strength to close the wrong table in order to open a right one.

But the plan stopped at the coastline. Its extension to the inland areas — planned, announced, awaited — has never been completed. The revision adopted by the Cappellacci executive with Resolution 45/2 of 25 October 2013 was definitively approved with Resolution 6/18 of 14 February 2014. The Pigliaru executive annulled it with Resolution 10/20 of 28 March 2014 and revoked it with Resolution 39/1 of 10 October 2014. I do not enter into the reasons for the one choice or the other: I record

the sequence. October 2013, February 2014, March 2014, October 2014. Within twelve months, a definitive approval and its cancellation. The instrument that should give the territory a horizon longer than a legislature followed the calendar of legislatures, not its own.

The plan in force remains that of 2006, for the coastal area alone. Twenty years on, half the island — the half where I live, the half that is depopulating — lies outside the plan that was supposed to include it. This is not a technical detail: it is an implicit hierarchy. The coast, where rent concentrates, has had its plan; the interior, where abandonment concentrates, does not have one yet. I attribute to no one the intention behind this asymmetry: I note that planning arrived where the conflict was sharpest and the value highest, and did not arrive where there was less to contend for. This too reveals the discipline for what it is: it moves where value moves, like every bargaining process. Where there is nothing to negotiate, no plan arrives.

And inside the planned half there arose the paradoxical effect I know best, because I administered it: the double regime that does not dialogue. On one side the PPR, on the other the *municipal urban plan* (PUC) called upon to conform to it. The sequence, seen from the town halls, is almost always the same. The municipality drafts the PUC. The PUC is declared not consistent. The Superintendency blocks it. One redrafts, one postpones, one awaits an opinion. Ten years pass. And meanwhile the village empties.

It is not the fault of an office or a person: it is the product of two overlapping legal orders that no one ever

obliged to talk to each other. Each of the two, taken alone, is coherent. The landscape plan protects; the municipal plan orders; each answers to its own law, its own offices, its own timetable. The defect lies at the point of contact, which no norm watches over: the coherence between the two instruments is not anyone's task, it is the premise everyone assumes fulfilled. And what is presupposed by all is tended by none.

The double regime is a mediation never performed, unloaded onto the shoulders of whichever mayor is in office — who has neither the instruments nor the power to perform it in the place of those who should have. To negotiation I devoted an entire book — *Vincere in politica con la trattativa*, 2024 — and from there I take my vocabulary: when two systems must coexist, someone must negotiate the conditions of coexistence; if no one opens that negotiation, the conflict does not disappear, it moves down a level, until it reaches the step that cannot refuse it. That step, in the territories I administered, is the town hall: the closest, most exposed and weakest body, which inherits a dispute between legal orders disguised as a building file. The mayor does not mediate between PPR and PUC: he endures them both. And the citizen, who of the entire chain sees only him, presents the bill to him.

There is in this mechanism a lesson that goes beyond the Sardinian case. Institutional mediations do not happen by themselves. It is not enough to write that one instrument shall conform to another for the conformity to occur: there must be a table, an authority to convene it, a fixed time frame, a final decision. Where the table is missing, what remains is the exchange of papers —

observations, counter-arguments, requests for supplementary documents — which is the bureaucratic form of the absence of negotiation. The exchange of papers never closes, because none of the correspondents has the power to close it. Ten years of case review are not an excess of zeal: they are a negotiation never opened that goes on not opening, one file at a time, while outside the office the village loses inhabitants.

Then there is the longest-lived endemic species: the *derogation*. The Sardinian "Piano Casa" building-expansion law was born with Regional Law No. 4 of 23 October 2009, "Extraordinary Provisions for the Support of the Economy through the Revival of the Building Sector and for the Promotion of Interventions and Programs of Strategic Value for Development." Volumetric expansions by derogation of up to twenty percent, raisable to thirty with energy requalification; demolition and reconstruction with increases of up to thirty–thirty-five percent. The extraordinariness was already in the title: time-limited measures, justified by the economic conjuncture, destined to switch themselves off.

Derogation, as a legal institution, has its own precise logic: it suspends the rule for a given time, in the name of an interest the rule had not foreseen. It is physiological as long as it remains an exception. It becomes something else when it is renewed, because every renewal is a decision, and every decision has its supporters. Around an expiring derogation there always forms an audience of vested interests — those who have started work, those who have promised, those who have invested counting on the extension — and that

audience, at every deadline, comes back to ask. The ordinary rule has no equivalent audience: no one takes to the streets for the return to the norm. So the extension nearly always wins, for lack of a counterpart at the table.

The Sardinian facts follow this script with documentary precision. The deadlines were extended in 2011, twice, and then in 2013; the regime was transfused and renewed into Articles 30 and following of Regional Law 8 of 2015, itself amended and extended in 2017 and in 2019; and the extension ordered in 2021 — twelve years after the extraordinary law — was declared constitutionally illegitimate the following year. Twelve years of declared extraordinariness. Derogation, on this island, is not a mishap along the way: it is the regime.

Derogation, moreover, shows what the discipline it suspends amounts to. Every extension of the Piano Casa passed through an assembly in which the defenders of orderly planning also sat. If urban planning had the force of a body of knowledge, it would have opposed its arguments to the last extension as to the first, and at least once it would have prevailed. It did not go that way: what interrupted the series was not a technical argument, it was a judgment. Here too the ultimate custodian of the rule is not the discipline: it is the judge. And an order that must have itself defended in court is not governing. It is resisting.

The law of 2015 — No. 8 of 23 April, of the Pigliaru executive — was meant to be the bridge toward the true reform. The bill on the governance of territory, prepared by regional minister Cristiano Erriu and approved by the executive in 2017, was finally to replace Law 45 of 1989. It

never reached a vote. On 25 September 2018 it was Erriu himself, in a letter to President Pigliaru, who asked that it be sent back to committee: "We cannot but take note that the numbers are not there and that the political will to move forward with the discussion of this law is lacking." The opinion of the Council of Local Autonomies was missing too. The procedure ended there.

I often reread that sentence: it does not say the text was wrong, it says the agreement was missing. It is a rare diagnosis: an institution putting the absence of consensus in writing. In my experience, legislative shipwrecks are almost always recounted in another way — the text was immature, further study was needed, the framework had changed. Formulas that save everyone and explain nothing. Not here: the man who had led the work named, in his own words, the variable that technical reports do not contemplate — the will.

It was not the first time. The Soru executive too had its urban planning bill, which fell in 2008–2009, in the events that accompanied the president's resignation and the early end of the legislature. Two organic attempts, two different majorities, two identical outcomes. When the same experiment, repeated under different conditions, gives the same result, the result ceases to be an accident and becomes a datum. The datum is this: in Sardinia an organic law on the governance of territory has never managed to replace that of 1989 — under no majority, in no season.

These shipwrecks I read with the negotiator's instruments: an organic law on the governance of territory is the most difficult negotiation a regional

assembly can face, because it puts at the same table the coast and the interior, protection and rent, the village that empties and the contested beach. Every article redistributes consolidated expectations; every attached map shifts values; every definition — what is agricultural, what is urban, what is transformable — is a pact between interests that do not declare themselves as such. If the agreement does not ripen — the agreement, not the text — the law does not pass. One can write the best possible text: without the understanding that holds it up, it remains paper. Law 45 of 1989 is still in force not by its own merit, but through the absence of the understanding that should replace it: it remains in force, by subtraction, as the only point on which no one has to reach agreement anew.

When the internal negotiation fails, the external one remains: with the State. It is the other constant of the endemic laws — they end up before the Constitutional Court. Regional Law No. 1 of 18 January 2021, of the Solinas executive, "Provisions for the Reuse, Requalification and Recovery of the Existing Building Stock and on the Governance of Territory. Urgent Extraordinary Measures and Amendments to Regional Laws No. 8 of 2015, No. 23 of 1985, No. 24 of 2016 and No. 16 of 2017," bears a title that is, by itself, a catalogue of stratifications: four different laws reached by a single graft. Judgment No. 24 of 2022 struck it: declared illegitimate, among others, were the articles on the extension of the Piano Casa, on building tolerances and on double conformity, for violation of Article 3 of the Statute in relation to the fundamental norms of economic and social reform.

It was not an isolated bolt of lightning. Already Judgment No. 308 of 2013 had annulled a regional norm of 2012 which, by way of authentic interpretation, excluded wetlands from the three-hundred-meter protection strip: the Sardinian legislator — this the principle — may not retroactively reduce the scope of landscape protection. The technique was subtle: not to repeal the protection, but to declare what it had always meant — and meant less. The Court did not follow the subtlety: it looked at the effect. The lesson, taken as a whole, is simple: primary legislative power is not sovereignty.

It is a strong negotiating position within a relationship that remains two-sided, and whoever exercises it as if the second contracting party did not exist finds the counterpart in court rather than at the table. In my vocabulary it is the difference between the power to write and the power to decide alone: the Region has the first, not the second. Every Sardinian law on the territory is, whether the legislator wants it or not, also a proposal addressed to Rome; if the proposal ignores the interlocutor, the interlocutor answers with the only instrument the system leaves it when the table is deserted: the challenge. Constitutional litigation, seen this way, is not the pathology of the system. It is negotiation continued by other means — the slowest, the most costly, and the only ones left when no one was willing to sit down first.

The cycle has repeated itself, identical, with the latest-born. Sardinia transposed the national *Salva-Casa* law with Regional Law No. 18 of 17 June 2025: a selective transposition, grafted not onto a new law but onto the

old Regional Law 23 of 11 October 1985, the one on oversight, sanctions and the regularization of building abuses. That law is still the pivot of the island's building regime. The Council of Ministers challenged it by resolution of 4 August 2025 — less than two months later — and the proceedings brought by direct challenge, registered as Appeal No. 31 of 2025, targeted nine provisions: Articles 2, 4, 6, 7, paragraph 1, letter d), 12, 14, 15, 18, paragraph 1, letter a), and 19. The perimeter of the challenge says by itself the scale of the conflict: not one controversial article, an entire framework.

The Court heard the case in public hearing on 25 March 2026 and decided the same day; the judgment — No. 86 of 2026 — was filed on 21 May and published in the Official Gazette on 27 May. The operative part works with a scalpel: Article 2 illegitimate in its entirety; Article 4 illegitimate in part, limited to the words "and railway"; Article 6 and Article 12 illegitimate in part; Article 7, paragraph 1, letter d), illegitimate. Various other questions — including those on Articles 14 and 15 — declared inadmissible. Look at the grain of this outcome: one whole article, fragments of two others, one letter of one paragraph, even two words excised from a sentence. The demolition of the landscape plans, between the late nineteen-nineties and the early two-thousands, proceeded by whole instruments; today it proceeds by words. The conflict has not abated: it has grown finer.

And in the *Considerato in diritto* there is a passage that brings the appendix back to its point of departure. The Court itself recalls Article 3, letter f), of the Statute — the same two words of 1948, "building and urban

planning" — and states that the qualification of State norms as fundamental norms of economic and social reform pertains to the merits, in a sense analogous to what was decided with Judgment No. 24 of 2022. Almost eighty years later, the two words of the statutory list are reread in Rome to measure what the Region may still do with them; and the judgment that strikes the law of 2025 recalls the one that struck the law of 2021. The case law cites itself, confirms itself, builds a system — a ring that links onto the ring before it. The regional laws it measures, one at a time, do not: each starts over, each falls, each leaves to the next only its own title in the list of amendments.

Forty years of legislative production, and the latest graft still rests on the trunk of 1985 — a law born for oversight, sanctions and the regularization of building abuses, that is, to administer the pathology, become the pivot around which the physiology turns. This too is endemism: the Sardinian normative flora does not renew itself, it stratifies. Every political season adds its own ring to the trunk — an extension, a transposition, an amendment of the amendments — and none has the strength to plant a new tree. Whoever must apply these norms never reads a law: he reads a stratigraphy, and to understand what is in force he must be an archaeologist before being an administrator.

That transposition I remember well for another reason too. On the floor of the Regional Council, on 10 June 2025, during the general debate, my colleague Maria Laura Orrù — an engineer by training, mayor of Elmas — put on record that, contrary to those who maintain that urban planning does not exist, or who

wonder whether it does, she could affirm that it was a reality. The rebuttal addressed a thesis that has been circulating in that Chamber for years: mine. I thanked her in silence, and I thank her here. There is no negotiation without a counterpart who believes in her own reasons, and a discipline defended by one who practices it is the interlocutor this thesis hopes for: if urban planning exists, let it prove it by governing the territory; if it does not exist, as I maintain, negotiation will have to govern it. In both cases the debate is open, and it stays inside the Chamber, which is its proper place. And that is already, in itself, a form of negotiation better than a derogation.

Let me sum up. Every Sardinian endemic law, if one reads its records, is a negotiation in disguise. The Salvacoste was a negotiation of the Region with its own building past, which for once held up even before the Court. The Piano Casa is a permanent negotiation between the rule and the interest, renewed extension after extension. The challenged laws are failed negotiations with the State, closed in court rather than at the table — from 308 of 2013 to 24 of 2022 to 86 of 2026, three judgments that are the minutes of three negotiations never opened. The double regime between landscape plan and municipal plan is a negotiation never begun between two administrations of the same territory, paid for by a third. The fallen organic bills are negotiations broken off within Sardinian politics, between the coast and the interior.

In none of these cases did the discipline decide; in all of them the balances of power decided — or failed to decide. The mask changes: now it is the language of

protection, now that of simplification, now that of economic emergency. Beneath the mask, the structure is always the same: interests measuring themselves against one another, positions being exchanged, agreements being made or not made. The technical vocabulary serves to ennoble the outcome, not to produce it. Anyone who has frequented those tables — and I frequented them for a quarter of a century, from the town hall to the Province to the Chamber — knows how to tell the moment when indices and volumes are being discussed from the moment when the decision is being made: and they never coincide.

And here it is, the Sardinian formulation of this book's refrain. The island to which a constitutional law handed, in 1948, the power to write for itself the rules of its own territory is also the one where the discipline has governed least: plans annulled, reforms shipwrecked, derogations made permanent, laws demolished piece by piece by the Court — most recently, word by word. If urban planning existed as a body of knowledge capable of imposing itself, almost eighty years of primary legislative power would have sufficed to prove it: no discipline has ever had, in Italy, a freer field. It did not happen. Normative endemism proves it by documentary means: urban planning does not exist; what exist are balances of power — between coast and interior, between protection and rent, between the regional capital and Rome — which every now and then someone manages to put into law. The task of politics is not to deny this, nor even to regret it. It is to bring those balances of power to a table before they end up in a courtroom, and finally to call negotiation by its name.

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Index of Names

[Entries are indexed by chapter; App. refers to the Appendix.]

Alberti, Leon Battista — 1
Alexander, Christopher — 5
Aristotle — 1
Astengo, Giovanni — 4, 8
Augé, Marc — 8
Bauman, Zygmunt — 8
Benevolo, Leonardo — 6
Bernini, Gian Lorenzo — 2
Bobbio, Luigi — 8
Boeri, Stefano — 6
Bucalossi, Pietro — 7
Calvino, Italo — 8
Cappellacci, Ugo — App.
Cerdà, Ildefons — 2
Cullen, Gordon — 5
Davis, Mike — 6
De Carlo, Giancarlo — 5, 8
Erriu, Cristiano — App.
Filarete (Antonio Averlino) — 1
Fisher, Roger — 8
Fontana, Domenico — 2
Friedman, Yona — 6
Galasso, Giuseppe — 7
Garnier, Tony — 3
Geddes, Patrick — 3
Gehl, Jan — 6, 8
Gropius, Walter — 4
Harvey, David — 6
Haussmann, Georges-Eugène — 2
Healey, Patsy — 8
Hippodamus of Miletus — 1
Howard, Ebenezer — 3

Jacobs, Jane — 5
Koolhaas, Rem — 6, 8
Le Corbusier — 4, 5
Lefebvre, Henri — 5
Lindblom, Charles — 8
Lynch, Kevin — 5
May, Ernst — 4
McHarg, Ian — 8
Mies van der Rohe, Ludwig — 4, 5
More, Thomas — 1
Moreno, Carlos — 6
Moses, Robert — 5
Mumford, Lewis — 3
Oliva, Federico — 7
Olivetti, Adriano — 4
Orrù, Maria Laura — App.
Palladio, Andrea — 1
Piano, Renzo — 8
Pigliaru, Francesco — App.
Plato — 1
Quaroni, Ludovico — 4
Rossi, Aldo — 5
Scott Brown, Denise — 5
Secchi, Bernardo — 6
Sennett, Richard — 6
Simon, Herbert — 8
Sixtus V — 2
Sitte, Camillo — 2
Smith, Neil — 6
Solinas, Christian — App.
Soru, Renato — App.
Unwin, Raymond — 3
Ury, William — 8
Venturi, Robert — 5
Viganò, Paola — 6
Vitruvius — 1, 8
Wright, Frank Lloyd — 4

About the Author

Roberto Deriu is a politician, journalist and writer.

In this essay he applies to the governance of territory the method of principled negotiation: not the ideal plan, but the agreement that can actually be built.

Also by the author

La democrazia rapita, 1998
Il gioco del silenzio, 2002
Smemoria, 2003
Scacco matto, 2011
La pantera di Bultei, 2018
Vincere in politica con la trattativa, 2024
Il principe della Repubblica, 2026