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**HISTORY OF SPACES AS A PIVOTAL TOOL FOR PLANNING PRACTICE:
ANALYZING FRACTURES AND CONTINUITIES WITH SCHOOLCHILDREN FOR
THE MASTER PLAN OF DICOMANO, ITALY**

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ABSTRACT

On the occasion of the drawing up of the new Master Plan for the Municipality of Dicomano (Tuscany), the authorities requested not just a project from the planners, but the initiation of a process that ‘could create and develop a dialogue between inhabitants and institutions’. The *dialogical planning* included a one-year Laboratory with schools (for children between 8 and 11 years), which involved young generations in the discussion of urban values, sense of belonging and transformation of spaces. The idea was that of valorizing children’s knowledge on city space, and their role of “multipliers” for involving their families in the planning process. A specialized team of architects and planners followed the experience, seeking to avoid the “marginalization” of results and guaranteeing their confluence into the “adults’ plan”. Being Dicomano a city destroyed twice during the XX century (by an earthquake in 1919 and the IIWW in 1944), the first idea was to rebuild the history of spaces, creating a dialogue between new and old generations. The Children Plan proposal played as a catalyst for other citizens, which then were involved in the participatory process which shaped the Structural Plan. The paper analyses some features, limits and results of this experience.

INTRODUCTION

In Italy, the lawmaking and conformity control on urban/rural planning is a task of Regional Governments, while the design of Master Plans is up to each municipality, under the coordination of the Province.

Since 1995, Tuscan legislation has ruled that Municipal Urban Planning be developed in two different yet complementary instruments. The first, entitled the Structural Plan (PS), must be approved in union by the Municipality, the Province and the Region, and deals with the strategic contents of the planning, establishing the non-negotiable rules for active protection and enhancement of the territory’s resources. The second instrument, entitled the Town Planning Regulation (RU), en-

ters into the details of landuse and examines in depth some general analyses and planning elements. This instrument is more flexible and may be modified in substantial autonomy by the Municipality, although with the obligation not to violate the maximum construction capacity and the 'load' limits established in the strategic guidance instrument.

In 2003, all the Tuscan municipalities that had not yet drawn up their own Regulatory Plan according to Regional Law 5/95 (Decree on the Management of the Territory) had to begin the process of construction of the Structural Plan. Among these was the Municipality of Dicomano, a town of 5,000 inhabitants 36 kilometers from Florence, whose territory (61 km²) extends by bridging the territories of the Mugello and the Valdisevie valleys, establishing itself as a "bridging-territory" between two different environments that surround the Florentine metropolitan area.

In the case of Dicomano, the drawing up of the Structural Plan, which began halfway through 2003, was complicated by a series of municipal and regional elections. The last phase of the planning then coincided with the entry into effect of Regional Law 1/05, known as '*Super5*' because it enhanced (without destroying) the main principles of the preceding law n° 5. So the small municipality thus became the 'opening act' in the experimentation of the new decree², had to undergo a condition of 'planning transition' full of uncertainties associated with the difficulties of the regional and provincial technical offices in interpreting parts of the new law and also linked to a delay in the law's arriving to applicable legislation, which only took place in 2007.

This state of partial legal confusion led to a sort of 'joint creativity', which developed during the Conference on Services, a space for direct dialogue between the various institutions that, for both laws, represents the fundamental moment in a planning process that is managed in collaboration by local bodies, Mountain Communities, Provincial and Regional governments. In particular, one of the fundamental elements of the '*Super5*' was immediately accepted, i.e. the need to impose the choices along paths that harmonize dispersed information, inter-institutional collaboration and areas of wide-ranging social participation (without confusing the three concepts, as the law seems to do still).

THE MASTER PLAN: RESHAPING A MARGINAL BUT PLEASANT PLACE



Fig. 1. Dicomano seen from a bridge on the Comano river

Historically the centre of merchant trading, located on the plane at the beginning of an important valley in the Apennines running between Tuscany and Romagna (at the confluence of the rivers Sieve and Comano), Dicomano in the last twenty years has undergone a demographic explosion, growing by almost 2,000 inhabitants up to 5,000. The prospect, never realized, of a motorway link from Incisa to Barberino transformed it into a residential centre, marked by intense commuting to and from the Florentine metropolitan area. Despite the fact that Dicomano and Contea (its largest subsection) have undergone enlargements that were often inattentive to architectural and landscaping values, overall the territory has conserved intact its historical-environmental heritage (Fig. 1), distinguishing itself from nearby municipalities through a strong growth in quality rural tourism over the last decade.

The drawing up of the Structural Plan allowed an occasion to rethink the relationship between larger and smaller centers and open land, to enhance the renewable energy sources and the quality of agricultural, forest and pastoral production, suggesting the need to review the relationships between Dicomano, the surrounding territories and Florence, and clear up the ‘hierarchy and roles’ with regard to hypotheses of economic development.

In order to sustain such a strategy, some young architects from the Laboratory of Ecological Planning of Settlements (LaPEI) of the University of Florence decided to propose to the municipal officials the start up of a permanent collective debate that – on various different levels – could involve institutions, inhabitants and entrepreneurs firstly in the drawing up of the Structural Plan and then of the Town Planning Regulation. This is why the approved plan still has, in its structuring parts, a visible trace of the participatory developments and the debates carried out, so that the detailed urban planning instruments may take these elements into account. For example, the General Report opens with a so-called “*Matrix of perceived social demand*” which is also translated into some “maps” which constitute part of the Structural Plan proposals. Perfecting what had already been tried in the Structural Plan for Scandicci (a town of 50.000 hab. in the first metropolitan belt of Florence), the matrix was built through several different participatory processes, among them a series of 30 interviews and thematic focus-groups with all the social organizations active in the area, the open space of “*The Thursdays of the Plan*”, and a Laboratory with local schools.

For the meetings, symbolic spaces such as the Council Hall and the Planning Office were made available. Citizens could also interact with the Plan’s drafting process through more individual-based tools, as their suggestions could also be gathered through a special e-mail and a glass-box in the Town Hall. The approved Structural Plan assigns to the detailed urban planning instruments the task of perfecting the social dialogue developments already initiated, arriving at the most possible ‘shared’ choices through working out any territorial tensions and conflicts.

LISTENING AND PREFIGURING SCENARIOS: THE METHOD AND ITS GOALS

Signing their contract with the Town Hall, the coordinators of the Structural Plan³ proposed and obtained from the local institution that an explicit mention was made of the participatory methodology of planning, in order to safeguard it in case of a political turnover. Another agreement was also signed to support the work of a special team of specialized architects⁴ in charge of a ‘*Children’s Plan*’ (PBB or “*Piano delle Bambine e dei Bambini*”), whose work had to be carried out in the local schools and the summer camps. The aim of the whole range of participatory processes to be implemented was that of stimulating an acknowledgement of territorial values, to reinforce the sense of belonging to place (perceived as a common anchor in the identity of both old and new generations) and the general study of the transformations and historical fixed points in the community of Dicomano, in order to propose analytical hypotheses for their redesigning.

Being that Dicomano represents a small-scale territory, whose community is used to have a daily dialogue with elected officials “on the ground”, neither the planners nor the administration could be sure that the opening of “participatory spaces” could be considered attractive. But their common bet was to transform a one-to-one dialogue between citizens and politicians into a broader “community-based” discussion on the future of the municipal territory. That’s why the ‘*Children’s Plan*’ was seen as an important “catalyst”, which – through the discussion with young generations - could indirectly attract families and raise a more widespread interest on the planning instruments, so contributing to “fill up” the other participatory spaces mainly conceived for the adults.

Such a goal explains why the laboratory for the PBB was the first participatory planning space of discussion to start. If it opened in summer 2003, so two months before the beginning of the school-year 2003-2004, it was for a wise decision. In fact, as the collaboration of the formal school hierarchy and administration was not considerable for granted (especially till the so far innovative project had not started yet, and its main features did not look so clear), the planning team decided that an “informal space” as that provided by summer-camps could play as a better engine for the start-up of PBB. As a matter of fact, the process worked out as imagined. So that – when schools

started in September 2003 - the first experiments of collaborative design with children and the thematic fieldtrips on the territory (these organized with the support of all the specialists in geology, botanic and other earth sciences who were collaborating with the Structural Plan) had reached a far enough clear structure to convince the school administration to actively participate in the drawing up of PBB.

Under this “experimental” perspective, the Laboratory for setting the ‘*Children’s Plan*’ was structured following a “variable geometry”, being that children of different age were involved in the start-up on a voluntary base, while three typologies of school-classes (from 8 up to 11 years old) were mainly targeted in the following 8 months. Nevertheless, the ambition of the planning team was to avoid that PBB could just be considered a “mere experiment” (whose results could be marginalized as often happens with school laboratories), but instead could incise on real planning, having a concrete “weight” on the decisions to be lately addressed by the general Structural Plan. That’s why its outputs were of two different types: those linked to the “analysis” of the municipal territory, and those processing acquired data to transform needs, proposals and dreams into “design maps” to be officially included in the graphic tables annexed to the formal Structural Plan (PS). In order to grant this incisiveness, since the beginning the administration and the coordinators of PS agreed on two issues: that all the deliverables produced by the PBB (included a small film which used the technique of “*shadowing*”, following several children during their daily life in the city spaces) were to be formally annexed to the documents to be approved by political institutions, while the expressed needs hierarchized by young participants were going to be officially inserted in the “*Matrix of perceived social demand*” and introduced in the design maps of future assets.

Despite the centrality given to this “project-oriented” graphic deliverables, the first group of outputs of PBB was not less important. In fact, they dealt with studies on the local territory values and the perception of living spaces by young inhabitants, trying to adopt an holistic and trans-generational approach and thus contributing to shape the so-called “cognitive framework” which the Tuscan Law considers the solid base on which the PS should be developed, and which was being

built exactly in the same period when the PBB Laboratory was functioning. Specifically, being that the articles 4 and 5 of the Regional Law on Planning provide the need to define the “Territorial Statutes” and a set of “structural invariants” (i.e. a list of resources, goods and rules which can be considered as “pivotal elements of the local identity”) through processes of “participatory democracy”, the PBB Laboratory have been considered an important tool to identify some main values which constitutes the territorial heritage of Dicomano centre and its large rural and wooden roundabouts. In order to reach this aim, the ‘*Children’s Plan*’ was structured so to produce a series of drawings and documents which could at the same time: (1) test the levels of belonging, ownership and local knowledge of young inhabitants; (2) verify the existence of a diffuse interest for the safeguard and valorization of historic values (but also reclamation of the local territory in general) within their families; and finally (3) activate their passion and creativity so to contribute with important proposal to the setting of the Structural Plan.

FRACTURES AND CONTINUITIES IN THE HISTORY OF LOCAL SPACES

What previously underlined clearly states how the PBB process was first of all a “laboratory for producing knowledge and new materials on Dicomano” interacting with the shaping of the general “cognitive framework” on which the Structural Plan proposals was due to be based. The pivotal idea was to valorize the role of children as:

- (1) “detectors” of quality of places and relations;
- (2) “data collectors” who could verify the socially-spread perception of recognized territorial values and the modalities they use to transmit, reproduce and modify themselves through generations,
- (3) “promoters” of gathering desires and knowledge usually dispersed;
- (4) “activators” of new social imaginaries, through ownership and resemantization of places.

This explains not only why the PBB team was composed by a mix of researchers and practitioners (which happened to be all women), but also why the Laboratory was put in place with the active

collaboration of school professors, which were indispensable to enroot the process in the local milieu, but also to give it sustainability beyond the time limits of the Structural Plan drawing-up. Working on the history of spaces became one of the main axes of the PBB Laboratory. If during the 2003 summer-camps the main goal had been that of verifying the (high) level of knowledge of involved children regarding uses and functions of their territory (so to set the next phase to be developed during the school year in the most coherent way), in September 2003 a different cycle started. This was aimed to analyze in depth the cycles of production of Dicomano area, using a multidisciplinary approach which could relate historic buildings, street names, memorial plates, monuments and landuses. The youngest children of different classes worked separately on the same issues (to then confront their different approaches), while the middle-school students worked out on complementary themes, which have then been composed into a larger mosaic of analysis and proposals. Learning how to read a bi-dimensional map proved useful to deliver to these young citizens an important tool for the future; but it was a gradual process, which used 3-D models, plasticine, filming and on-field surveys (where participants were invited to sketch the reality around them and identifying landmarks) in order to gradually provide the new skills.

Among the first collective studies produced in the different phases by the Laboratory, one was the “*Mapping of the important places and their mental boundaries*”, which not only identified the places considered “ugly, pleasant, dangerous, funny etc.” (in the perspective of young citizens), but also demonstrated how for the majority of children Dicomano is part of a major ecosystem which expands beyond the administrative borders. The exercise was amplified to other generations, through some questionnaires which the students brought home.

During this phase – centered on confronting “perceptions” of citizens with a different age - a lot of data were also gathered and re-elaborated on the familiar history and its links with Dicomano, being that the municipality knew a large residential boom in the last 20 years and roots in the place are not equally strong for every present inhabitant. This allowed to produce some comparative drawings on how the public spaces were used in the past and are used in the present, and how work-

ing and relaxing activities were and are distributed on places which became urban landmarks for the different generations of citizens.

One of the most important activities of this first phase were the collective field-visits needed to study and critically analyze their living environments and their “affective places” (fig. 2) in terms of functionality, safety and equitable access for everybody. Through these activities (which also produced a video shot by students) a “collective map” was realized to rebuild the “mental representation” of all the urban environment (fig.3).

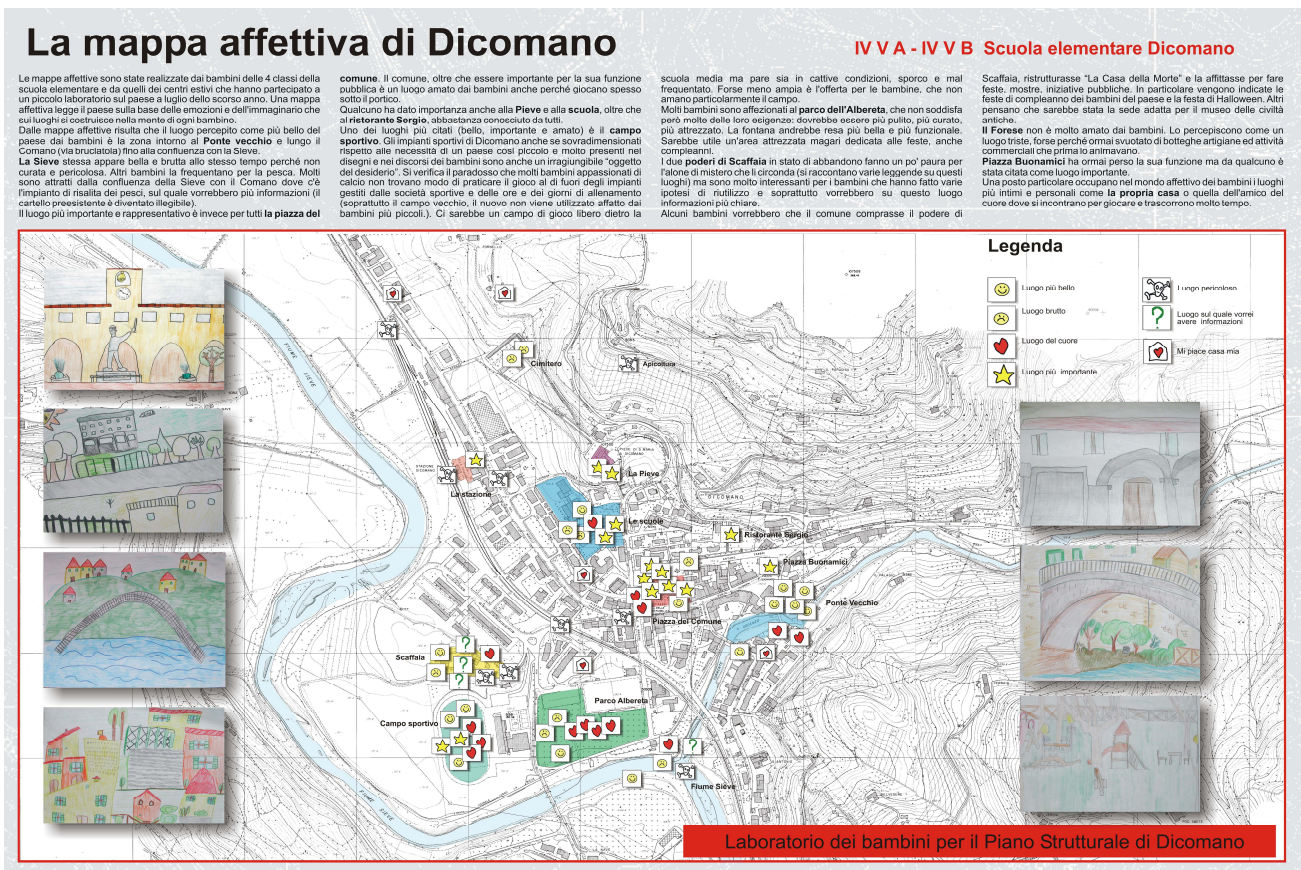


Fig. 2. The affective map of Dicomano drawn by the students



Fig. 3. The collective synthesis of schoolchildren desires

In order to broaden the vision to the larger open territory (which represents more than 90% of the municipality), a second phase dealt with exercises aimed to analyze the perceived relationship between the urban and the rural, how each one of these poles is defined, and which are the reasons why the children use and appreciate some less-urbanized areas of Dicomano.

During this phase an important discussion raised on the recent modifications of the economic system, which is today selecting only some parts of the territory for supporting the new production cycles. A mental “bio-region” was identified by children, according to their experience of agriculture, cattle raising and other activities linked to the still “natural” parts of the municipality. This helped to discuss on whether and how to maintain the memories of past production cycles⁵, and made reflect on how solutions to modern problems could be better found within a cross-institutional collaborative perspective with other neighbors-municipalities.

This second phase naturally led to a third one, which represented the most valuable contribution of PBB to the setting of the general Structural Plan. It was related to the “perception of territorial values” so to understand what is considered worth of conservation or transformation. Such a goal was pursued through the elaboration of several “mental maps” of the territory which stated the elements which contribute to “order” the territory, the predominant landmarks and the “identity anchorages” within Dicomano and its rural area. Some maps with “imaginary itineraries” linking the most significant places on the territory were also drawn, so to actively contribute to identify urban axes for shaping the requalification of the historic centre. Being Dicomano a city destroyed twice during the last century (by an earthquake in 1919 and some battles between Germans and Allied armies in May 1944), the idea of rebuilding the history of spaces had a huge importance for linking the three phases of the Laboratory.



Fig. 4. The Game of History: an analysis of fractures and continuities in the built-environment

Children were stimulated to gather old pictures and doing interviews to their grandparents on the “asset” of the old city before the tragedies, and an on-field session on architectural styles was organized, thus experimenting the capacity of children to recognize the old permanencies and the bad-built insertions of the two post-tragedy reconstructions. Through imagining a third future tragedy, an interesting “provocation” was proposed to the school-children: which hierarchy of urgencies would they propose in case Dicomano was going to be seriously damaged by an external event? Which place would be more important to preserve or immediately reconstruct? Why, where and how? The experiment proved very useful to verify the perceived “cohesion” of Dicomano as a “community”, to discuss what “solidarity acts” could be, and how the young residents and their families perceive the relations between natural environment, living spaces and risks, and how they reflect on the issue of “disaster prevention”.

Special exercises were dedicated to two issues identified as “crucial” by the participants to the Laboratory: the relationship with the rivers which cross the historic centre, and the survival of markets and fairs which always represented an important feature for a village located in a valley-floor at the confluence of important historic roads coming down from the Apennines and leading to Florence.

The last phase of the Laboratory was dedicated to imagine a re-planning of some “perspicuous places” previously identified as central anchorages for identity and feelings of belonging, as the Town Hall square (Piazza della Repubblica), the old Market Square, urban parks and so on...

SUMMARISING SOME RESULTS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

The PBB laboratory was shaped as a “limited in time” experiment, which anyhow produced denser results than those originally imagined. It was very positively welcomed both by students, teachers, professionals, families and some associations which worked on environmental issues and usually collaborated with the Town Hall in order to organize the summer-camps and study-trips to the local Natural Park of Montagna Fiorentina.

When its final results were presented to the city, on April 2004, the audience was so large, that the imagined venue (the hall used for the Town Council meetings) had to be substituted with the main city square, because was not spacious enough to cope with all the convened people. Even if is not possible to establish a strict cause-effect relationship between the ‘*Children’s Plan*’ and the successes of the general process to draw the Structural Plan, it is a fact that the participatory meetings organized after this public event gathered a growing number of participants than the previous ones, so that wouldn’t be a rash statement saying that the PBB largely contributed to raise awareness on the planning process that was ongoing in Dicomano, emotionally and functionally making possible the process of open meetings, entitled *The Thursdays of the Plan*” because of their weekly occurrence.

The praises recognized to the Dicomano planning process by the Tuscany Region (which proposed its exposure in several technical events) and some specialized planning reviews, also owe something to the PBB Laboratory, which represented the start of the overall social dialogue on the Structural Plan, in a city traditionally with no habit of citizen participation in shaping public policies and projects.

Apart from the methodological issues, undoubtedly the elaboration of PBB enriched the contents of the Structural Plan, and the complexity of the four possible future scenarios⁶ examined with citizens during the planning process, one of whose was collectively chosen as a horizon of future reference on the base of the “*Matrix of perceived social demand*”. The latter contained a concise summary of all the requests and suggestions that had emerged also in the “*Children’s Plan*” (PBB), which left clear traces in many graphic elaborations of the Structural Plan as well as in the regulatory contents of the ‘Statute of the Territory’ and in the Technical Norms which sustained the Plan’s choices. For example, several public spaces and monuments pointed out by children as “meaningful places” were protected and valorized, as well as the rethinking of relationship between the urban fabric and the rivers took into account several suggestions given by the PBB. The PBB maps evidencing the critical points of the journeys “from-home-to-school” were also considered relevant to

imagine new “protected paths” and pedestrian footbridges to connect living neighborhoods, school and urban parks which had previously been only randomly interlinked.

The conservation-improvement of the country graveyards and of traditional place-names (sometimes the only memorial trace of old landuses and productive functions cleared by the traumatic events which had struck the city in the XX century), but also the importance of protected walkways for children and elderly people, the role of festivals and traditional markets and the valorization of the new fito-depuration plant are all part of that group of elements collectively identified as “meaningful” during the process of public debate, which partially owe their acquired centrality to the PBB Laboratory.

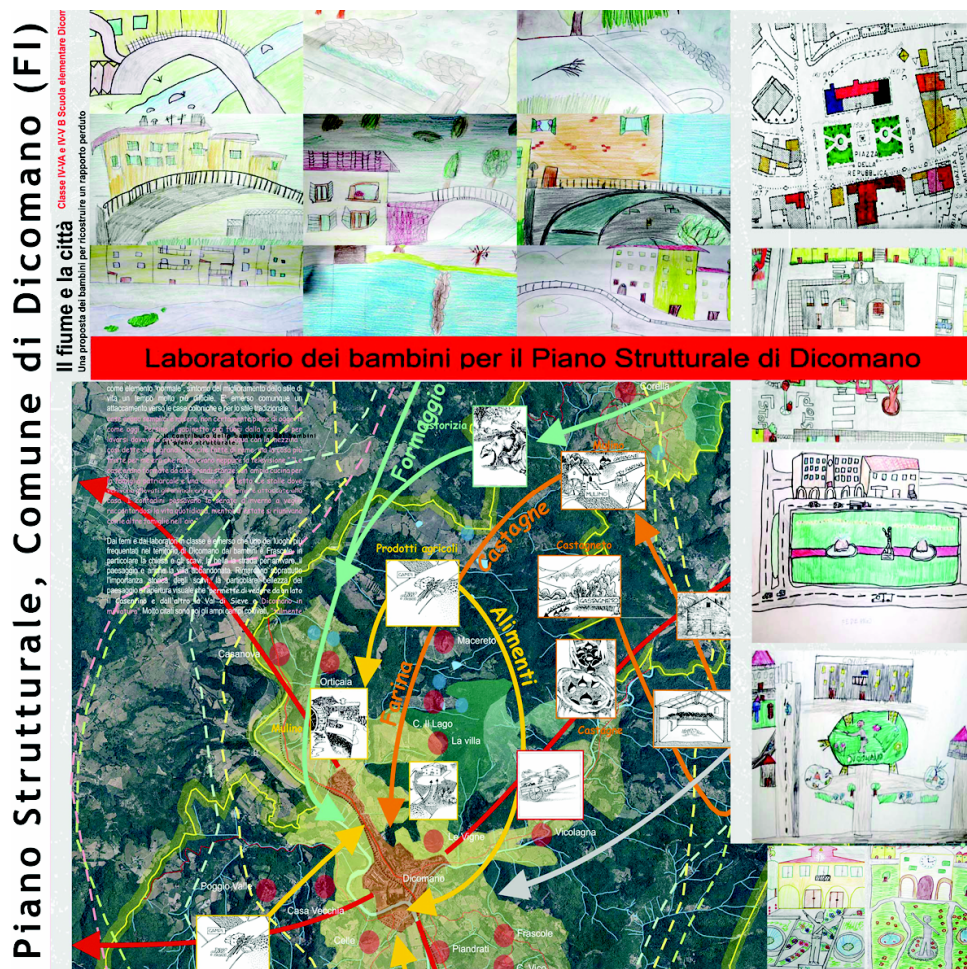


Fig. 5 – One of the complex maps inserted into the adults’ Master Plan

By means of the public dialogue, the concept of “structural invariant” was refined in comparison to the widespread way of understanding it in Tuscan town planning tradition and – thanks to some suggestion emerged during the PBB plan - it ended up also including elements to be protected that were not “physical” (as toponimies and fairs) but nevertheless were strongly linked to social variables.

In terms of modifying the “representational languages” of the Structural Plan, the PBB was important, too. In fact, it got planners and citizens used to a simplified and pictographic way of representing the territorial values which could be easily understandable by everyone. This undoubtedly counted on the strategic choice made by the Planning Work Group to highlight the historical and environmental qualities of the territory, allowing an easy ‘spatialized’ reading of the results of the social dialogue. To that end, traditional forms of drawing the territory and its landscape were used in the Structural Plan; also, realistic/expressive-types of drawings were studied and used⁷, as part of a new experimental approach towards illustration which is part of the so-called Territorialist School born in Florence⁸.

If the reports of the Children’s Plan became a central part of the official documents of the Structural Plan (instead of being relegated - as often happens - to just appendices) and if their contents have notably influenced the final version of the regulatory instrument, this was due to a strong agreement between the Planning Work Team and the municipal administration. In the following year (also due to a change of the mayor) the political will was not anymore so clear...

To be a complete “experiment” the process could have had a follow-up later on, during the next phases of the Structure Plan, but – unlike other municipalities in Tuscany and Emilia Romagna Regions - no investments have been done in this direction, neither by public local institutions nor by social organizations. Although it had no formal continuity, the pedagogic effects of PBB appeared still alive later on, especially in 2006-2007- when the new regulatory instrument was put “under observation” (as provided by Law) before its final approval.

During this phase, open to critics and proposals of amendment coming from the citizens, a

group of 90 children living in a residential area poorly linked to the rest of Dicomano signed a document to the Town Hall asking for an equipped playground in their neighborhood. It was an important signal, because there is a widespread habit of individual critics to regulatory instrument, and the fact of being this amendment proposal a collective one showed the raising of a new spirit among inhabitants.

More recently, the municipal school proved active during the public debate on the drawing of the Plan for the Historic Centre and the new Town Planning Regulation (RU - whose design is still under way). Actually, some of the ideas and demands which the Structural Plan acknowledged from the “*Children’s Plan*” are starting to be implemented. In 2004, the “*Children’s Plan*” reached the majority of its pursued short-term goals, but its mid-long term ambitions are still to be fulfilled. Six years later it could be worth to verify how many of its suggestions were taken into account in the transformation of Dicomano, and maybe it could be done with a process of collective evaluation. Also, it could be an interesting research that of studying which mid-term effects it left on the participants, in terms of widening their territorial vision and their critical capacity of understanding the planning complexity. The PBB just “opened” a window, giving the start-up to a process which could today be recovered, and transformed for reaching new goals.

With the recent entrance in force of the Tuscan Law on Participation (n° 69/2007), the regional government opened the opportunity to fund yearly some creative participatory processes on the base of requests by local authorities, but also schools and groups of organized citizens. So, new opportunities exist to renew the spirit of the PBB experiment in order for schools to intervene actively in the shaping of local policies and projects. Up to now, no school in Tuscany took advantage from this opportunity: maybe could Dicomano’s teachers and the newly elected municipal administration undertake this challenge, and liven up an interesting pedagogic strategy with the aim of multiplying and enlarge the experiment elsewhere?

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Architect and Town planner, he is researcher at the Centre for Social Studies at Coimbra University, Portugal. The author thanks the Mayor Ida Ciucchi, the municipal staff and all the planning team members for their kind help during the writing of this article.
2. The PS was approved with the municipal by-law n. 3 of 22/02/2007. The majority of its documents are downloadable from: http://ims.cm-montagnafiorentina.fi.it/ps_web_dicomano/pag_html/navigatore_piano.htm
3. Arch. Giovanni Allegretti (author of the present article) and arch. Daniela Anceschi
4. Architects Annalisa Pecoriello (coordinator), Manuela Conti, Francesca Rispoli and Adalgisa Rubino.
5. Until the last decades of XX century, for example, the “cattle” cycle included reproduction, raising animals, production of milk, butter, cheese and meat. Today the majority of farms in Dicomano concentrate on edible meat production, giving no importance to “collateral” products.
6. *Trend scenario; the Scenario for gravitation onto the Metropolitan Area; the Scenario for protection and conservation; Self-sustainable local development.*
7. The Scenarios and Maps of the Heritage, examples of this form of illustration, use pictographic illustrations and ‘relational’ legends (i.e. legends that illustrate the system of reciprocal relationships between elements and with the landscape). All the illustrations refer to real objects, but, in order not to relinquish the role of a document destined for exact “certification” of the quantitative and qualitative consistency of the elements illustrated, with a low symbolic content. This methodology ensured that the content of the Structural Plan was enriched by meaningful suggestions and ideas.
8. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Territorialist_School