

# Visual communication in urban planning and design: an underestimated question

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*This paper examines visual communication in urban planning and design. It develops into two parts.*

*The first five paragraphs refer to the features and the problems of visual communication by isolating and discussing some key concepts.*

*The last three paragraphs offer suggestions in relation to innovative forms of presentation by taking into account the most interesting tendencies of urban planning and design today.*

Keywords: urbanism; visual communication; drawing

## **La comunicazione visiva in urbanistica: una questione sottovalutata**

*Il testo si occupa della comunicazione visiva in urbanistica e si sviluppa in due parti.*

*I primi cinque paragrafi si riferiscono alle caratteristiche e ai problemi della comunicazione visiva isolando e discutendo alcuni concetti chiave.*

*Gli ultimi tre paragrafi offrono alcune suggestioni circa le forme innovative di presentazione dei documenti urbanistici prendendo in considerazione le tendenze odierne più interessanti.*

Parole chiave: urbanistica; comunicazione visiva; disegno

## **Features of communication in urban planning and design**

Carrying out urban planning and design through the construction of visions, projects and rules means a continuing involvement in long and highly contextualised processes and in different kinds of events interesting varying groups of participants and agents. Questions regarding communication and appropriate language are important because today images and consultation programmes are often used in the context of structural schemes and strategic agendas.<sup>1</sup>

The need to give form to new measures based upon interaction is dependent upon various aspects which are now a distinctive part of urban planning and design:

- the involvement of participants who communicate at different stages and levels, and in various ways;
- their valued input, and that of society in general, for participations in decisions, which are no longer delegated to professionals;
- the interpretation of social dialogue as the means of opening new possibilities;
- the recognition that language is key to build knowledge.

*Comunicare l'urbanistica* (Communicating urbanism) is the title given by Giovanni Caudo and Anna Palazzo to their book, which describes various European experiences in this field. They refer to communication as to a key practice for planning based on dialogue. In fact, those authors state that communication is relevant because of the need to widen the group of people concerned as a requirement and guarantee for the feasibility of planning choices, in order to increase the effectiveness of planning (Caudo, Palazzo, 2000).

Another Italian planner, Attilio Belli, interprets the deep change that has taken place in planning by investigating the 'emotional shift.' From this point of view, the centrality of communication is the consequence of acknowledging that emotions – as a combination of cognitive, psychological and phenomenological aspects – can play practical role becoming a relevant factor in motivating action (Belli, 2003; Belli, 2004).

The question of communication was addressed by experiences on public consultation that had been highlighted in Italy in the early 1990s, and have been developed through lines of specialist studies. The necessity and social importance of communication have also become relevant to law-makers, sanctioned by Italian Law no. 150 of June 2000, which governs the information and communication activities of public administrations. Also numerous publications on urban marketing confirm options which are now widely pursued. Following the Italian urban planning reform formalised by the

regional authorities, we also find important innovations about the planning process which must involve many figures on the production side, and include the participation of the recipients. It is for this reason that urban planning operations are sometimes accompanied by the construction of detailed 'communication plans' produced by specialists.

The features of urban planning and design make communication a specific and difficult aspect, because the transmitted contents provide the general system with social values and, for this reason, require awareness and attention in the stimulation of emotions. The communicator (or rather, the client commissioning the communication, typically public administrations) is generally a 'plural actor' whose objectives are not always explicit, and are sometimes difficult to identify and unify. The objectives may be information and publicity, persuasion, involvement/sharing and even mobilisation – objectives which are not analogous and which imply a different language, as well as different methods for those elaborating the communication products. The recipients, then, may share in common the territory in which they live, or specific interests in urban choices (political, administrative, economic, and cultural interests). It is therefore difficult to identify a common interest. The motivations and areas of responsibility on the one hand, the code of language on the other hand, must be recognised and distinguished in order to qualify the messages.

Other differences arise between external urban planning communication (aimed at those to whom regulations, projects, policies are directed) and an internal communication (between those involved in producing regulations, projects, policies). Internal communication allows, and sometimes requires, a specialist language, which is almost always inadequate, if not counterproductive, for external communication. The context within which the communication occurs (institutional situation, exhibition, conference or seminar, reportage etc.), and the circumstances (for example, before or after an institutional procedure; in anticipation of a specific response or for general information purposes) are further variables.

The wide range of factors has a considerable effect upon the form of the messages (Gabellini, 1996b). The aims of the client, the kind of recipients, and the communication contexts and circumstances constitute a complicated and variable blend of factors which make it necessary to elaborate, case by case, detailed urban planning communication projects.<sup>2</sup>

### **Three key concepts: communication, representation, presentation**

Communication, representation and presentation require practices and theories that are to be found in disciplines which tend to partially overlap. In order to make a distinction between them, so that we can better understand the way in which they work, we can consider their central purposes.

Communication places central importance upon the *interaction* between the communicator and the recipients; representation is concerned with *description and interpretation* of the subject matter to be communicated; presentation refers to the *technique*, to the solution, in order to give form, appearance, shape to what is being communicated. The complexity of the processes in which the urban planner and designer is involved brings the three areas together. Communication always arises in operations involving discussion and participation, but the agreement of participants

(which nevertheless remains only a possibility) requires persuasion as to the solution being proposed; then, persuasion may be helped or hindered by the 'visual discourse' built by the series of presentations which refers to the meaning and sense of the representation, to its capacity to respond to questions, aspirations, needs. This is the reason why these three key concepts are different in the purpose, but connected in the issue.

Communication, representation and presentation are typical urban planning and design questions. At various times they have entered into the agenda of theoretical debate, but only today they have shown themselves to be of equal importance, profoundly interlinked into the varied and detailed solutions that urban planning processes produce. Recognition of their importance, and concern for the area in which they intersect, could change the characteristics of practices: the attention towards these interconnections presupposes an awareness as to line of reasoning, from the demands of communication, leads to questions about the most suitable forms of presentation, and their effectiveness to represent particular territories and specific problems.

In other words, we could say that the various kinds of presentation used by the urban planner, in printed and multimedia format, are at the same time a form of communication, as well as a 'symbolic form' (Panofsky, 1932; Panofsky, 1939; Cassirer, 1979). As a form of communication, presentation facilitates internal/external relationships, the dialogue of the planners and designers with the 'world' (a world populated with people with differing requirements and perceptions), and the promotion of actions. As a symbolic form, presentation is connected to the tradition, to the relationship of urban planners and designers with the subject matter of their project and its representation (Gabellini, 1996a).

### **Two constraints: publicity and agnostic maps**

Communication is a complex concept, which employs a medium, as *how* to communicate, a meaning, as *what* to communicate, and a purpose, as *why* communicate. However, this multi-dimensional quality is difficult to preserve. Technicians who are concerned with medium, with meaning and with purpose tend to follow different routes and to lose sight of the fact that they are sharing the same problem. It can happen that those concerned with communication purposes are not confident with techniques (as it were a secondary or specialist concern) and, in particular, they ignore visual aspects, even though these constitute a fundamental prerequisite for the success of the communication itself. More attention they sometimes pay to written and oral communication techniques, but insufficiently and without fully recognising the role of technology in a process which is applied to planning and design, as well as to government. Vincenzo Andriello (2003), in his study on technological methods for dealing with information and communication, focused attention on their capacity to modify perception and, therefore, the construction of mental maps of the territorial area, and on the need to establish suitable systems to accompany consultation processes in this change. That is now very clear.

The extraordinary ease with which printed and digital materials are produced, the availability of increasingly sophisticated software, and the spread of high-speed internet facilities seem even to saturate the possible ways of receiving information. In fact, they can provoke an overdose, which annuls availability and the desire

to stop and think about the medium, meaning and purpose of the many images that bombard us. *Horror pleni* is the theme running through the complex and penetrating thoughts of Gillo Dorfles (2008) in this respect. He observes that all the time there is a need for something excessive, which causes a stir, an astonishment. But the result is exactly the opposite: we become accustomed to it, and therefore there is no surprise. We find ourselves facing a colossal 'pollution of the imagination': the excess of visual and auditory stimulation has produced the result that nothing any longer is free from signs, signals, indications. 'Sign hypertrophy' has reached a paroxysmal level, so that we feel (or rather we should feel) an increasing need to give our imagination a rest. Giovanni Anceschi (1999), referring to the effects of widespread technological advance, finds that there is a progressive substitution of 'normal' communication processes, where the rhythm is still relatively slow, with 'instantaneous' processes of communication. Switching time is measured by electronic equipment; on the other hand, communication rhythm is determined by human organs and by the human mind. Images act less and less as figures and more and more as stimuli, activated in order to trigger immediate reactions, as happens in conditioned reflexes. Images seem to lose their substance, the depth of their possible meanings. So, they lose their interest becoming unattractive, simple, unfinished material, rejects, leftovers for a constant superficial collage. Electronic equipment and technology produce an overall effect of unrealism, they generate a universal illusion of dematerialisation. Blindness and dullness are the product of general excess of the multi-sensorial hubbub of civilisation.

It is precisely the ease with which urban planners and designers have access to communication methods that can favour a banal use of publishing formats, of those kinds of communication which are fashioned around commercial objectives, and which have an undoubtedly seductive capacity. Publicity constitutes a point of reference for its 'mass' role, for the transversal use of methods and techniques, for the growing attention to the person and no longer just to the 'purchaser'. That progressive feature has caused the frequent involvement of artists who bring aspects of the collective imagination into this activity (Grazioli, 2001; Russo, 2003). But the use of publicity formats tends easily to favour seductive effects, facilitating a loss of point of view, poor control of the information and messages which they carry, feeble planning of the visual discourse. The space for meaning in the created images remains so compressed and unsatisfactory, caused not only by ease of production, but also by the tendency to aestheticize all contemporary expression.

When visual products become a 'series' which is distributed over time and follows different circumstances, as happens in urban planning and design, it is normal for there to be a loosening of its relationship with the specialist culture, with the territorial area or with the planning situation which has generated it. In this shift of communication, presentation can lose its role of pointing towards meanings and sense contexts, offering itself as an expression of autonomous communication logics. As a new publicity product, the project assumes a variety of forms (adverts, posters, booklets, leaflets, catalogues, videos, web sites, television commercials) and relegates the traditional plates and books to the sidelines: it is devised to capture attention, to leave an impact upon the memory, a sort of link which might be activated if and when the opportunity arises. The opportunity for the in-depth analysis is

postponed and may never take place: once the urban planning product has entered the publicity circuit it is in danger of becoming empty. Factors of various kinds and importance, reflecting more general conditions, contribute towards this possible shift: a market orientation of planning and design, as well as fundamental and irreversible changes in the organisation of urban planning work, with specializations which take the production of images far away from the places where they are planned.

An opposite trend to the construction of presentations, which freely borrow publicity techniques, is that of producing them automatically, without any communication investment, by reusing information held in the powerful Geographic Information Systems. They are developed for other purposes, by technicians who use software packages of another kind, but these presentations share with publicity presentations a misconceived relationship with technology, with representation and with communication.

Urban planners have been working with Geographic Information Systems for many years, discovering the problems connected with their use. An essay by Loredana Seassaro (1995) identified and clearly described some crucial problems at an early stage (little reflection, too much emphasis on practice, many failures) suggesting that a post-empiricist, non-exploitative and non-segmental position should be assumed in order to guarantee that GIS provided support for communication, and not only for territorial analysis and control processes. Geographic Information Systems, having overcome their initial difficulties to become a normal and fundamental work instrument for public administrations, are easily considered 'transparent' and complete. This misconceiving encourages detachment from the communication process, the concentration of attention on information and a substantial indifference to the forms in which maps are held, for a presentation which, having entered into the communication circuit, can produce undesired, and even perverse effects.

### **Scenarios, visions, images:**

#### **visualisation through figures and metaphors**

In urban planning and design communication, visual language assumes particular importance as the distinctive objective is the location of objects in space. The well-known views of Rudolph Arnheim (1954; 1969), according to whom sight is the primary 'medium' of thought because it is extremely articulate, and because its universe offers an inexhaustible wealth of information about objects and events in the outside world, assume their full significance. Gillo Dorfles (2008) argues that we should all be aware that there is a vast gap between word and image, recognise the autonomy of visual thought, and admit that there is something in the image which goes beyond the discursive and verbal factor and cannot be related to the word and to writing. There is therefore no doubt that the image exercises an influence, possesses a power which greatly exceeds the objective information which it carries, in that it offers the initial embryonic image of thought (Augé, 1992). This general and primordial need to visually communicate the urban project is expressed through a production of drawings which continue to be a necessary point of reference, but took a sudden swerve when urban planning opted for performative path, when the view developed that the construction of scenarios, visions and images was the new ground for communicating the future of a territory undergoing change. The new approach, together with

the extraordinary availability of technological means, has brought about a radical change in comparison with the very different way in which urban planning was traditionally portrayed (Gabellini, 1986; Chiappero, 2002). There are now numerous examples of that new genre which was introduced in the early 1980s.

Scenario, vision and image are not synonymous, even though they are sometimes used interchangeably in both urban and strategic planning. This mixed use is favoured by the polysemic nature of all three terms. Scenario is a word which appears in various disciplines and can, from time to time, have meanings which are related to aspects of knowledge or of action. When identified with knowledge, scenario can be used to represent current trends or a vision alluding to the demands and desires, which are to be found in a society. In planning terms it is used as a 'reasoned and recommended path', as an 'attempt to investigate what would happen if...', but also as a 'point of escape from the present' (Secchi, 2002a; Secchi, 2002b). Many agree with Bernardo Secchi when he states that there is no deductive procedure, which can lead contemporary societies to construct a consistent urban and territorial policy because the points from which to start are so powerful, and that the only practicable ground is to choose between opposing images. However, there is a persistence in the systematic procedure which leads to structure knowledge about current trends through the selection of a certain number of numerical indicators and therefore to produce conjectures as to the most probable combinations, producing synoptic pictures which are intended as alternative scenarios, as reasonable visions of the future.

If scenarios can also be just descriptive, visions always involve planning practices, even if they are developed in ideogrammatic and not iconic form.<sup>3</sup> If the construction of scenarios based on technical and scientific reasoning may regard visual communication as secondary, as a means of portraying information, it is frequent that the construction of visions leads to an investment on the visibility of conjectures and possible configurations, which are evident to the eye and can be perceived. In fact the configuration, to which the construction of visions generally aims, is the result of operations, which must satisfy (optical) reception as well as (visual) perception.<sup>4</sup>

The images which we find in plans, projects, and frequently also in programmes and policies, can, like scenarios and visions, cultivate the aspect of knowledge or action, can depend more on knowledge than perception, can be transmitted through abstract metaphors or on a 'physical base' (Lakoff, Johnson, 1980). The use of image and imagination has certainly established itself, over the last decades, as a widespread and, in some cases, decisive step in urban planning research. Indeed, images tend to replace scenarios and visions, in language as in usage. This is probably because the image is seen as a subjective and mental representation which is capable of capturing the multiplicity and the variety of real experience, which is versatile to express the process of forming a concept that appears to be neither linear nor solidly anchored in its own epistemological foundations. Another reason of success may be a greater latitude of meanings. In fact, image is situated halfway between perception and concept, because its subject-matter is neither absolutely existent (as in perception) nor absolutely inexistent (as in concept) (Belli, 2004).

When images cultivate the aspect of action, as happens in urban planning, they usually bring into play figures and they seek to anchor them in forms of physical space, so that they become a

'perceived structure'.<sup>5</sup> When images become visual figures, they have to be portrayed and methods and techniques are used to energize them. It is unnecessary to recall, in this respect, the constructive role that metaphors have on thought and upon action. Much of communication is involved in constructing metaphors precisely because of the power they have (Black, 1962). Their widespread use can be seen in the field of territorial policies when much of their role consists of producing images which are capable of being popular and of mobilising people and resources. The relationship with figurative or figurable metaphor constitutes a link between image and presentation. Presentation in this case is applied to the subject-matter which is recognized as being analogous, suggesting connotations and relationships which the associative mechanism of the metaphor makes it possible to identify. The metaphor works when it recalls elements and archetypes of history and of nature. The metaphor and other rhetorical figures can evoke/invoke, clarify, give voice to the initial ideas, become elements of knowledge and of receptiveness towards possibilities which interpret the existing identity of places, suggest possible developments towards the characteristics of architecture and building systems. They have greater persuasive function and power than the abstract and geometrical re-proposition of architectural and technological drawing types. The assumption is that territory is difficult to understand and that traditional forms of presentation are inadequate, and the mystery and ambiguity of metaphor can be brought into play when wisely used.

### Presentation as a product of design

Visual language has become a tool of urban planning, but for many operators it is still instrumental to rules and not to presentation. Many different presentations are now part of plans, even though they are often banal in structural plans, impressive in urban projects, partially problematic in the transcription of morphological regulations, and sometimes ingenuous in events involving public consultation.

The forms of presentation used by urban planners and (sometimes) strategic planners are becoming products which are entirely different from the past. Their salient features are:

- *symbiosis* between words and numbers and, more generally, the fusion of different codes and languages;
- *depth*, especially when produced in digital form, so that they act like curtains on theatre stages;
- serial *repetition* which removes every trace of a product 'made by hand';
- *fragmentation* due to the 'copy and paste' technique which favours free and different interpretations;
- *eclecticism* which explores uninhibitedly the many possibilities offered by the figurative arts,
- *redundancy*, an excess which aims to fixate the memory and push on to saturation point.

New forms of visual product, as a whole, indicate the desire of urban planners to break away from specialist and orthodox circles in order to establish a dialogue with a wider group of people, their search for a consensus which is regarded as essential for achieving action, their desire to put themselves on scene (exhibitions of urban design products have become normal), and their interest in creating fine presentations which are also gratifying status symbols for the public administrations commissioning them.



In all of this, a clear change can be seen, compared to the past. In 1998, I commented the panels of the first competition concerning community urban planning, where competitors were required to present their project in consistent ways with their communicative intent. I observed that, on the one hand, there was a general tendency to simplify the problem by proposing a presentation which was verisimilar and mimetic, even naïve, openly captivating but inappropriate for increasing the design capacity of inhabitants. On the other hand, I observed sporadic attempts to escape from that well-trodden path, producing drawings which were difficult to communicate widely and inevitably selective in terms of their interlocutor (Gabellini, 1998). What I described at that time as being cryptic, the expression of an 'expert' research, was the first sign of an abandonment of traditional urban planning and architectural practices, a move towards a visual discourse which drew from other cultures.

The change in communication methods, the variety of themes covered, the reference to states of fact or to future possibilities open up an extraordinary range of possibilities for presentations. For a design project appropriate for an urban planning which includes phases and products that are diachronic, diatopic and disjointed, it is necessary to develop the study of presentations, considering actors panels, keeping in touch with the current trends. Referring to the 'ideal reader' (to a person who the semiologists identify as the recipient who is equipped to understand the marks of recognition included in the message sent to him), the urban planner should know how to identify him for each presentation. In only a few cases is the inhabitant and, from time to time, the recipient may be the administrator, the owner of areas of land, the worker, sometimes the expert appointed to interpret the drawings in order to produce others in a process which, from the original idea, moves towards the completion of the works... In each of these cases, the problem should be posed in order to produce a visual text which is suitable for the purpose, in order to communicate with 'that' reader. If not, it is ineffective.

For all of these reasons, giving form cannot be a question which is only aesthetic, not merely a creative act. As Gui Bonsiepe (2005) emphasises, introducing the concept of design (industrial design) marks a fundamental shift which is impossible to disregard: design is an activity linked to society which presupposes research and experimentation in order to form a body of specific knowledge and an autonomous discipline, it is a rational activity which does not extinguish its function in semiotics, in being a sign, in returning to being an aesthetic question. These considerations suggest that the activity of communication, representation and presentation of an urban project or a plan should also be interpreted as 'design': not as a question of beauty, elegance, charm, which have nothing to do with intentions, with the communication of actions and policies, with actors as well as recipients, but a product constructed on problems which are tackled, on the process which resolves them and makes them manageable.

This way of understanding the form of the urban planning product presupposes a specific commitment, as well as the necessary time and resources. In this sense the research programme must be redefined considering that urban communication, which has become mostly visual, involves society and has increasingly wider circuits, that the distinction between communication aimed at the circle of decision-makers and clients, and communication aimed at citizens, is much reduced by the fundamental attainment that

territorial policies are public matter. For that the requirements of communication should lead to an examination of publicity techniques, but in order to ensure that urban planning and design is not transformed into a sub-category of visual communication, becoming dull and bland.

Some theoretical investment and work would seem necessary, centred upon:

- *necessity* which must/can be established between presentations and that which is to be communicated (principle of economy);
- *legibility* – comprehension in the broadest sense – of the presentations which are produced (principle of rationality);
- *relevance*, in other words a relationship between the visual product and meaning (principle of consistency);
- *meaningfulness* of the information, namely a conscious awareness of sense attributes (principle of density).

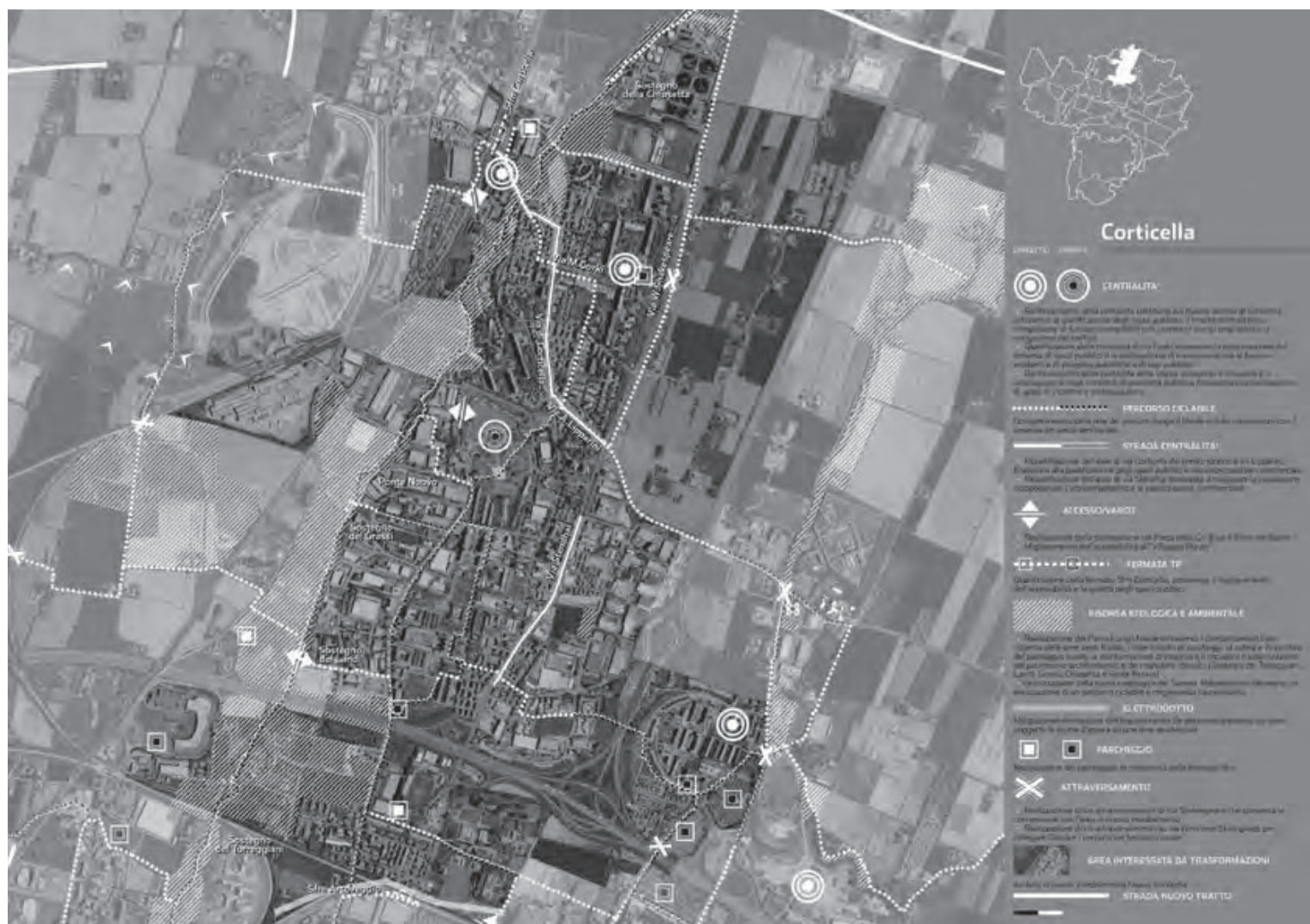
Essential, legible, relevant and meaningful might be the adjectives which summarise the requirements in producing drawings, in a multi-disciplinary activity in which the urban planner plays an active role rather than remaining an agnostic participant. The creation of a 'coordinated image'<sup>6</sup> can be a useful first step towards creating a common framework and recognisable form to an activity which is carried out using different timescales, methods, languages, and participants. On a coordinated image it is possible to establish the process of interpreting urban designs, constructing also a focus upon the 'natural' level of perceptive understanding.<sup>7</sup>

### **Three innovative forms of presentation: map-charts, outlines, manifestos**

Map-charts, outlines and manifestos are the expressions I chose to punctuate new visual dialogues in urban planning (Gabellini, 2010). The chart is a constant presence in visual forms of urban planning, indicating the debt which urban planning owes to geography in its origins, a relationship that can be traced back to ancient times through a shared 'attachment' to the land. It is, however, only a superficial affinity, because the urban planner designs the land for the purpose of transforming it, leaving the marks of building foundations across its surface, producing multi-layered presentations whose meaning always goes well beyond geography.

Maps aspire to represent the territory in its entirety and to interpret it; for this they use a smaller scale and become syntheses. The senses at a distance offer us not only a vast range of what is known, but even remove the viewer from the direct impact of the event being explored. Being able to go beyond the immediate effect of what acts upon viewers and upon their own actions, it enables them to examine more objectively the behaviour of the existing objects. It ensures that they concern themselves with what it is, rather than simply what it does to them and how they themselves react. This 'necessary' detachment even causes that cartographic presentation becomes unnatural and not human.<sup>8</sup>

The map is a two-dimensional drawing which shows the land in an incomplete and indirect way, it is a representation which is accessible to the eye. While the chart goes beyond mere presentation, giving information which makes it possible to understand its meaning: a chart can be a document which is only writing (see the Chart of Athens). A map can also be a chart, a chart can also be a map, but not necessarily: one may be so without the other. I propose to use the term map-chart for a composite plan drawing because what urban planners generally need is not only a map and



## Map-charts

- A composite plate which brings together visual aspects (map) and information (chart).
- Small scales to represent a vast range and to guarantee the detachment, that is the direct impact with the event being explored by the viewer.
- Captions – sometimes together with schemes – to provide assistance, or act as guidance and support, or even replacement of the drawing.





1. Opposite page: Bologna, Structural Plan (PSC), 2008. The map-chart of Corticella, the table depicting the rules of one of the 37 Situations identified in the municipal territory.
2. Rome, General Regulatory Plan (PRG), 2000. Structures of the Plan and metropolitan strategies.
3. Following page: Bologna, General Urban Plan (PUG), 2021. The map-chart of Urban layouts/Strategies and Vision.

piano  
urbanistico  
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Provincia di Bologna  
Regione Emilia-Romagna  
L.R. 10/2000  
PUG Bologna

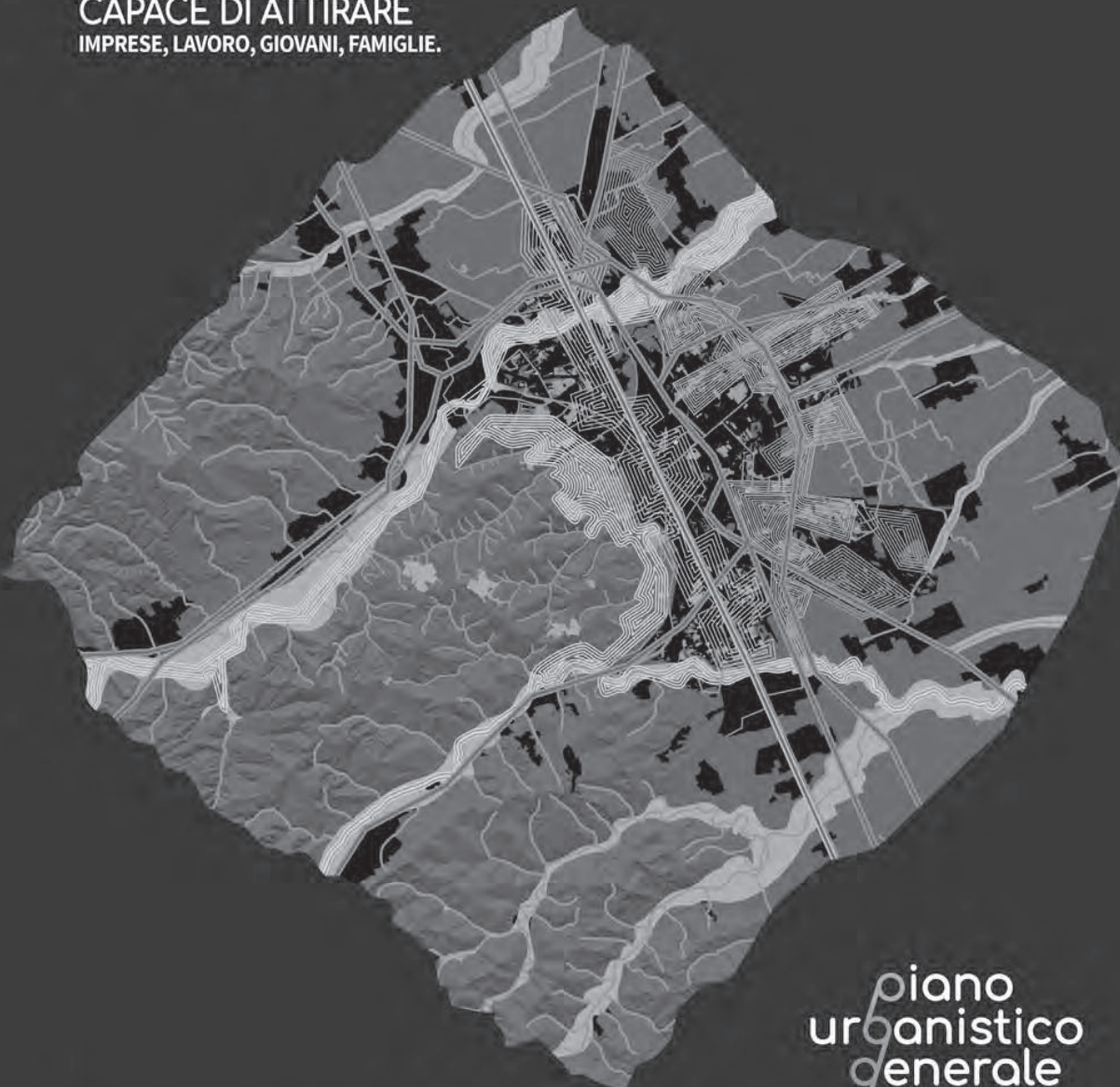
Struttura  
Regione Emilia-Romagna  
Assessorato Urbanistica e Ambiente  
Assessorato Città  
Responsabile del procedimento  
Piero Lotti



Assetti e  
strategie

Strategie  
e Visione

**BOLOGNA È IL CUORE DI UNA PICCOLA METROPOLI EUROPEA,  
RICCA DI DIFFERENZE E DISEGNATA PER LE PERSONE.  
UNA CITTÀ CHE VUOLE DIVENTARE SEMPRE PIÙ  
SOSTENIBILE E  
INCLUSIVA,  
CAPACE DI ATTIRARE  
IMPRESE, LAVORO, GIOVANI, FAMIGLIE.**



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#### Resilienza e ambiente

Assicurare salute e benessere a chi abita la città oggi e a chi la abiterà domani, minimizzando i rischi per le persone e le cose, anche quelli che derivano dal cambiamento climatico, sostenendo la transizione energetica. Assumere i target dell'Agenda 2030 delle Nazioni Unite e dell'Agenda Metropolitana come traduzione degli obiettivi del piano secondo un approccio metabolico.

#### Abitabilità e inclusione

Sostenere la crescita demografica offrendo abitazioni e servizi cui famiglie, giovani e studenti possano accedere garantendo altresì spazi innovativi per il lavoro.

#### Attrattività e lavoro

Rafforzare e adeguare le infrastrutture sopra e sottosuolo, per sostenere l'innovazione e la crescita economica, mettendo in valore le dinamiche locali; favorire i nuovi lavori e l'affermarsi di una economia circolare.



not only a chart but it is a two-dimensional presentation which maintains contact with the forms of the land and reinterprets them assuming explicitly a planning value and an overall value which seeks to bring together visual aspects and dialogue.<sup>9</sup>

A large number of map-charts are necessary in an urban planning operation. From the moment when the idea is first outlined (structure and strategy) up to the stage where the regulations are formalised, passing by way of discussion and agreement as to possible spatial configurations, the urban planner must be able to prepare map-charts which are each different from the other in terms of their subject-matter, scale, degree of selectivity and iconic significance, stratigraphic composition, verbal description. It is always necessary to calibrate on each occasion the verbal comment (captions) for functions of clarity, information and emphasis.<sup>10</sup> The captions either provide assistance, or act as guidance and support, or even replacement of the drawing (pictures 1-3).

In addition to map-charts, two other forms of presentation seem capable of corresponding to a new disciplinary image and of reinterpreting the link with traditional urban planning: a form which is as simple, such as the outline, and as complex, such as the manifesto. Both can be found sporadically in planning documents from the past.

The simplification, in terms of 'minimum effort' in presenting what can be seen physically and in the mind's eye, is the general feature of planning outlines, which become drawings that exclude, that seek to emphasise a particular characteristic, removing subordinate detail below the level of normal conditions so that the essential aspect catches the eye (Fuchs, 1901). What is displayed is a caricature which seeks to be convincing without being realistic, exploiting the fact that we are programmed so that, at first, we perceive not what is similar, but what is dissimilar, the deviation from the norm, which stands out and impresses itself upon the mind (Gombrich, 1972). The recognition of territory is made possible through a forced expressionistic description containing few elements, giving them a further significance which does not exclude the aesthetic dimension when this is capable of creating empathy. What is portrayed therefore is not the territory that is seen, but the territory that is remembered, imagined or perceived, through those few aspects which seem to sum up the range of properties which come to mind when we try to remember it.

Separating the essential from the accidental, 'laying bare' the territory as a whole by identifying its operable aspects, helps in making a comparison, assists in triggering off and sustaining a process of discussion for the purposes of building a shared image. For this reason outlines are particularly suitable in the practice of presentation and re-elaboration of the urban planning project and can play an important role in description, assisting in the process of observing and interpreting the city and the territorial area.

For an outline to have a recognisable value and to be effective, it must be sufficiently clear, capable of having an intellectual and not just an emotional impact. When it is designed professionally, this system has a good evocative value (Lynch, 1976). In this respect, the study by Abraham Moles (1972) seems to be of crucial relevance. In producing the outline he identifies five levels: the heuristic level (the 'transmitter' finds an idea, identifies the problem in outline form); grammatical normalization and correction (the symbols are compared with what is acceptable to the receivers to whom the outline is directed); the final draft is completed (professional skills are brought into operation);

aesthetic development (use of areas of liberty without changing the topological and legal structure); scientific control (testing legibility and reception, assessment of the relevance and adequacy of the outline). This study by Moles also makes it possible to clarify the nature of the sketch (often confused with the outline), which is to be regarded as an expression of the heuristic level of the outline, one 'state' of the outline.<sup>11</sup> Sketches and outlines are similar because of their summary, highly selective character; however sketches have a prevalently exploratory function, are useful above all for understanding and are a typical internal product, whereas outlines have an explanatory function which brings about a reduction in semantic density, and more than one person can take part in their creation. Digital elaboration, in offering the possibility of endless readjustment and the assistance of many 'hands', has certainly saved outline presentation from being self-referential.

The outline, due to its artistic and conceptual nature, is well suited to the interpretation of visible and invisible, and also to the description of non-contiguous and non-spatial relationships. Having no spatial form, the outline cannot be represented cartographically and, to an even lesser extent, through iconic three-dimensional presentations. It is the case, for instance, when it is used for strategic descriptions. If we assume that iconism is a question of degree, that it is an uninterrupted axis along which images become more distant from the object they portray until they reach high levels of abstraction,<sup>12</sup> and that along this band, at whose extremes are the icon on one hand, and the symbol on the other, then it is possible to identify three sections: realism or replication, essentiality or synthesis, and pictogram or abstraction. Outlines are to be found in the second or third section, as silhouettes, maps, topological models, ideograms and perceptions.<sup>13</sup> If the silhouettes, summarising the appearance of territorial areas in the three dimensions of space, are placed on the iconic side, the topological models and ideograms, representing physical/functional or simply logical relations, are placed on the symbolic side because they blur or lose their relationship with common sense and seek to draw upon the cognitive and imaginative reserves of expert knowledge (pictures 4-8).

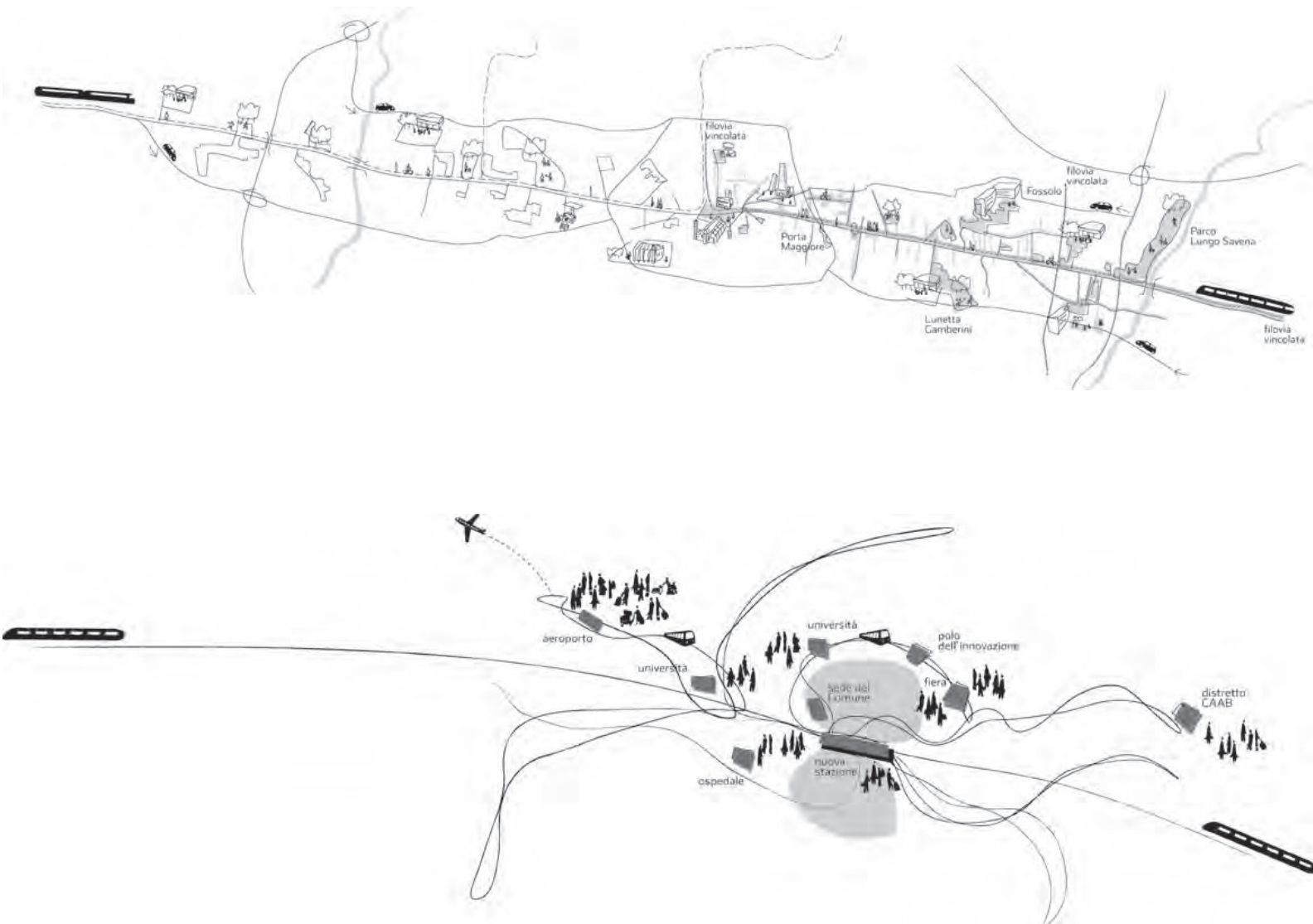
Given the discursive character of the urban and territorial project, it is necessary to have a discursive framework which, based on the various kinds of visual form, is capable of assisting its interpretation and use. Ildefonso Cerda has already considered this point: text, drawing and number, the three codes in urban planning and design dialogue, do not overlap at all; they form a chain of different meanings, which correspond to one single meaning, the urban plan. The drawing is very precise with regard to the morphology and location of activities, but it is too ambiguous in taking into account internal relationships, even if some of them are made visible through the differences in the intensity and colour of the inks (Cerda, 1979). Kevin Lynch, a hundred years later, stated that urban design does not have an effective basic language of its own. It borrows instruments from other disciplines, geography and architecture, even if they are only partially suitable for its purposes. If it were possible to develop a specific language for the city, it would probably be a graphic language, because graphics are better than words (but not always better than mathematics) for describing such complex spatial models (Lynch, 1981). But Lynch also recognised the need for the written word, because real information is still offered to us by the spoken or written word which constitutes the basis for every cultural premise.

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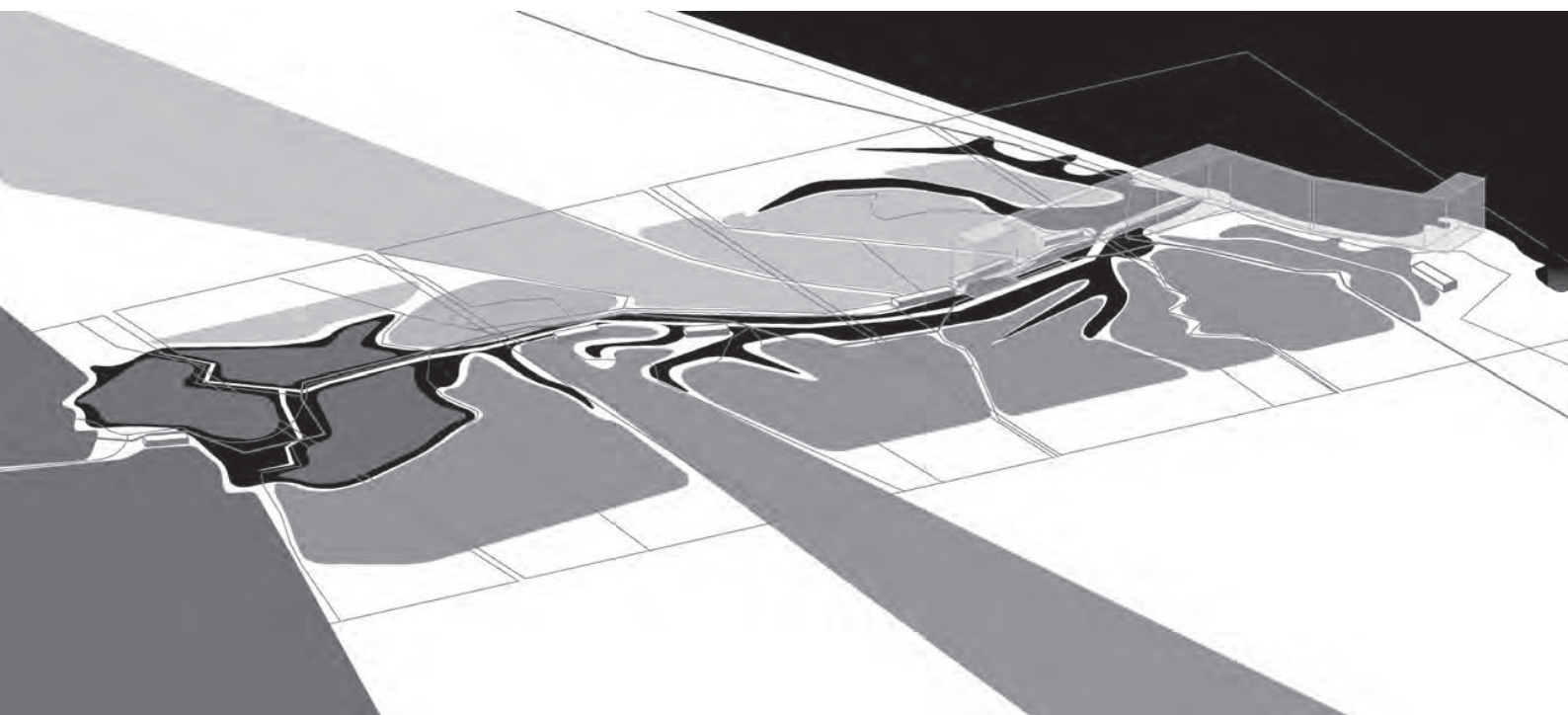
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### Outlines

- Synthesis in presenting what can be seen physically and in the mind's eye, excluding subordinate details and emphasizing particular characteristics, a sort of 'caricature' which does not exclude aesthetic dimensions.
- Conceptual and artistic nature, well suited to the interpretation of visible and invisible, and also to the description of non-contiguous and non-spatial relationships: as iconic as abstract presentations.
- No specific scale.



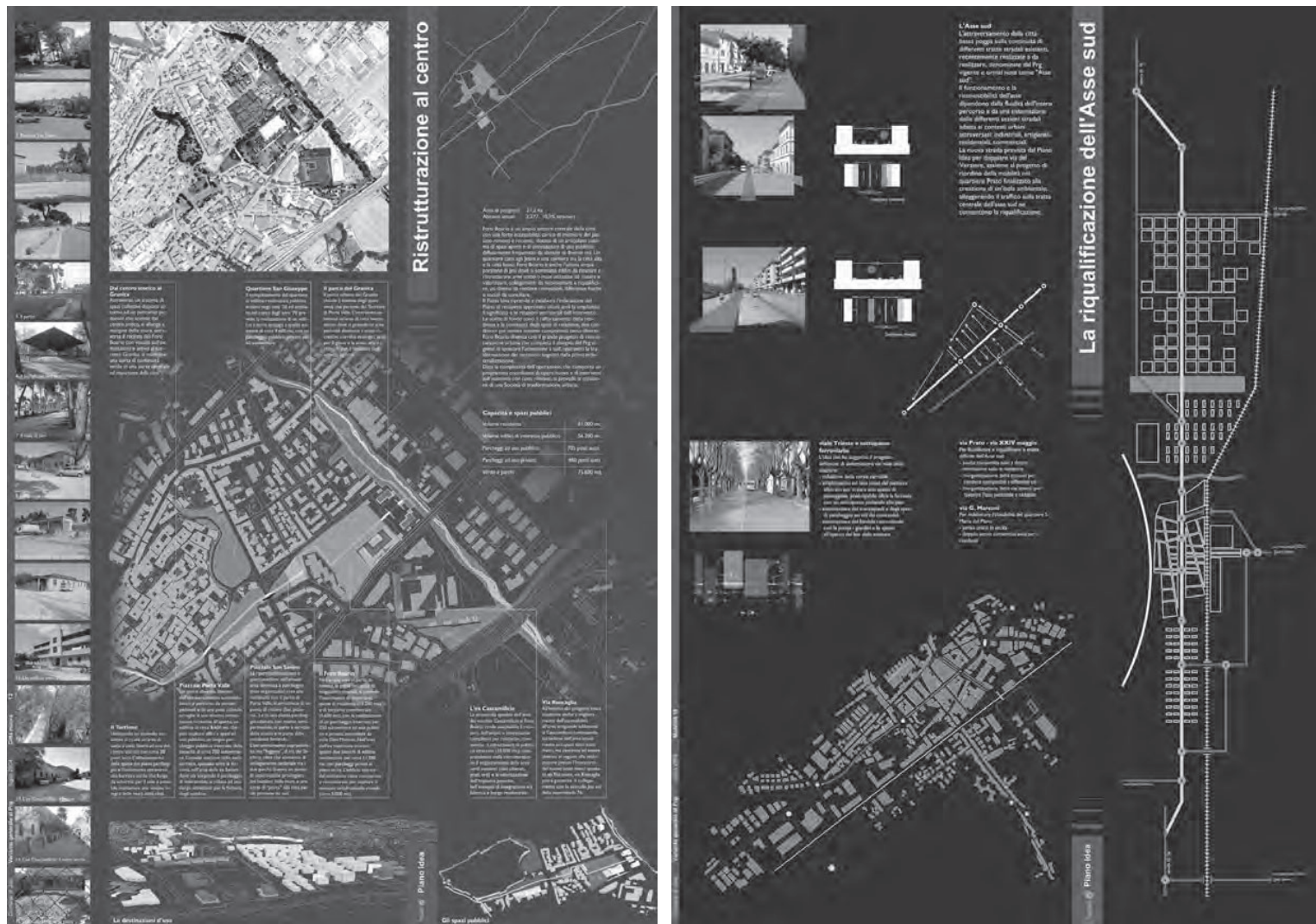
4-5. Opposite page: Bologna, Structural Plan (PSC), 2008. Outlines selecting places and practices to identify and distinguish Via Emilia Levante City (4) and Railway City (5).

6. Territorial project for Esino valley, 2010. Outline overlapping the layers and suggesting (metaphorically) the 'door-corridor'.

7. Territorial project for Esino valley, 2010. Outlines selecting meaningful layers of the schematic project.

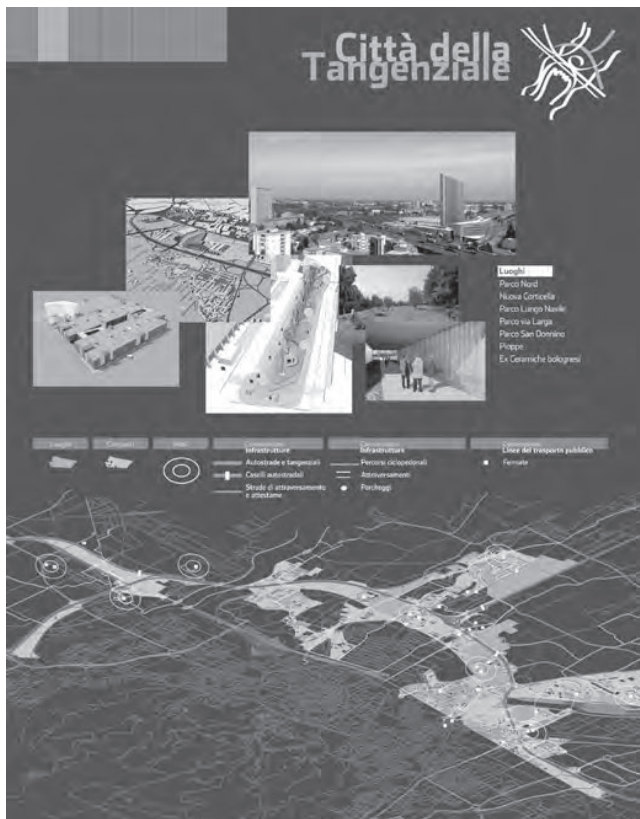
8. Bologna, Structural Plan (PSC), 2008. Three outlines (trials) of different iconic degree to give a synthetic idea of the 7 Cities.





## Manifestos

- Texts – not only captions – for assembling together a number of drawings creating complex written-visual constructs.
- A composite, communicative artefact from the point of language which may also include numbers.
- A narrative dimension using various styles, playing with verisimilitude and conceptualization.



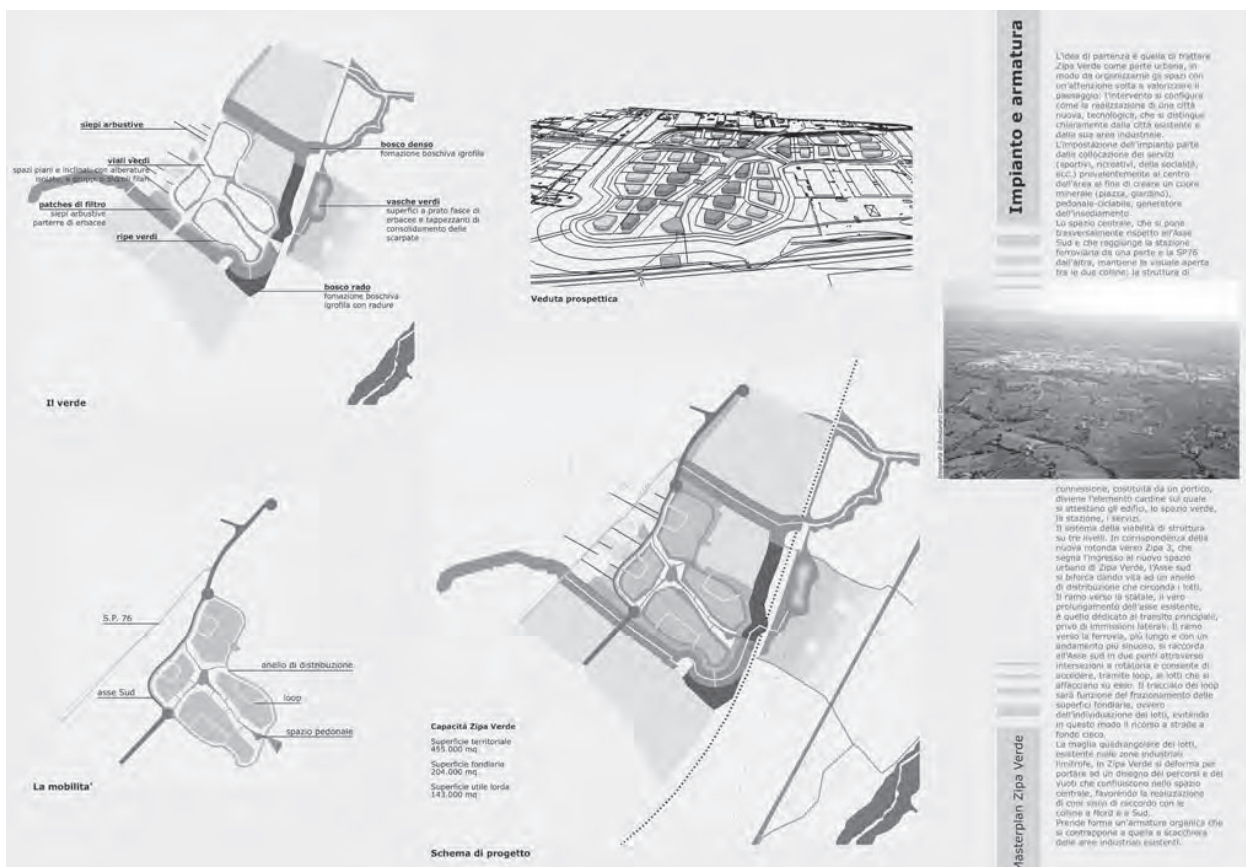
9-10 Opposite page: Jesi, Idea Plan, 2004. Two of the 18 manifestos presenting the main choices of the plan.

11. Bologna, Structural Plan (PSC), 2008.

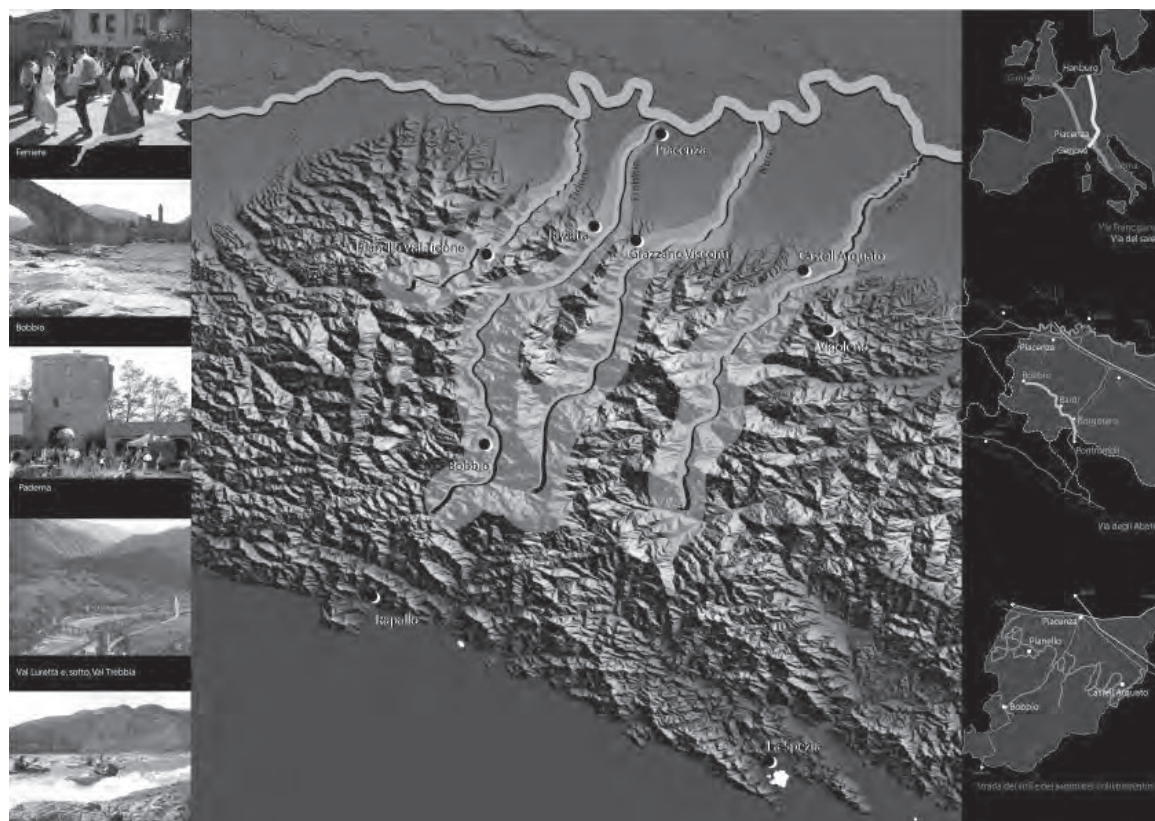
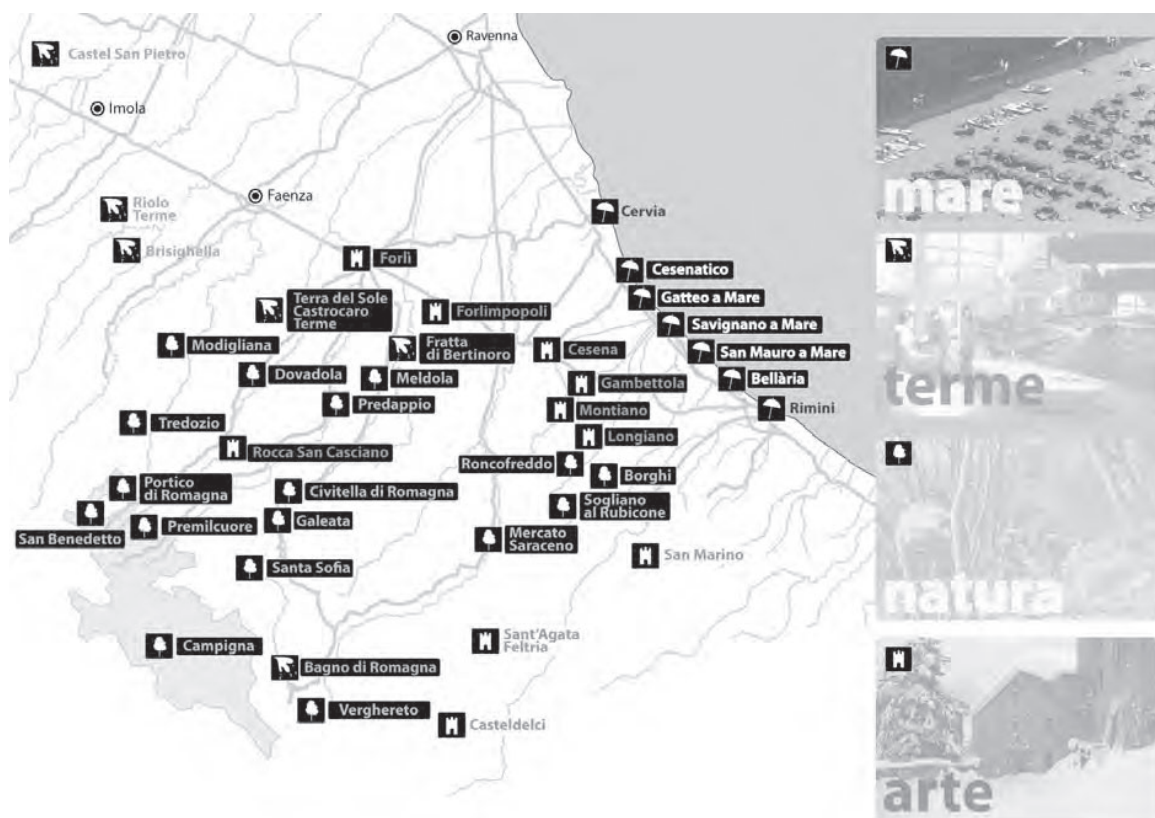
Manifesto presenting the City of the Bypass Road, one of the 7 Cities identified by the plan.

12. Jesi, Zipa verde, 2008. Manifesto of the masterplan for a productive-ecological area.

13-14. Following page: Emilia-Romagna region, Study for the Territorial plan, 2010. Two of the 27 map-charts interpreting the main features of the regional territory: Forlì-Cesena and the coast, Piacenza and Appennines.









Written text (and not simply the caption) is often indispensable for assembling together a number of drawings and can become appropriate in order to place them into context, creating complex written-visual constructs in the form of a 'manifesto'. The manifesto is a composite, communicative artefact from the point of view of language, which is an interesting component in the family of present-day urban presentations, capable of communicating to a vast number of recipients (Anceschi, 1981). Early versions of it are to be found in collections of historic planning documents, in particular those relating to urban planning competitions, where it was used to support a short, recognisable and effective communication which sought to provide a description of an idea and to receive public approval. The manifesto makes it possible to introduce a narrative innovation in the account, which is a traditional form of urban planning discourse.<sup>14</sup> The innovation can be realized in the breaking up the compulsory order of sequences (typical of an account) through the juxtaposition of blocks of text, various images, and numbers too, with sharp comparisons that evoke a multiplicity of associations in space and time. Bringing together publicity-style pop images, cartoon or photographic comic strips, digital rendering, pre-modern forms, etc., the manifesto offers the possibility of illustrating many different urban design products, playing also with verisimilitude and conceptualisation (pictures 9-14).

#### **Verisimilar and conceptual images together in a visual discourse**

It is difficult to agree upon how the present appears, to agree upon a description of what we see, what we know and what we are able to experience. It is even more difficult to agree upon how the future will be – something which we still have to create, something which has a strong influence upon our expectations, hopes, dreams, and interests. The two kinds of pictures, of the present and of the future, and their construction, bring different layers of sense into play. In order to decide how to design them, with the possibility of using and re-elaborating the wide range of options available, it is appropriate to reconsider the distinction between drawings as applied to things and drawings as applied to concepts, which are both necessary but not interchangeable. With iconic images – those which seem to be more faithful to how things appear to be, which are reminiscent of the appearance of perceived objects,<sup>15</sup> which are similar to the reality which they represent – the natural levels of perception (as opposed to cultural levels) have a greater impact than with abstract images; this favours understanding, but reduces the need to strengthen cultural input and reflexivity.<sup>16</sup> This opens a crucial problem in the interaction. In order to communicate by starting up a process of mutual learning, is it necessary to return to iconism? Is it the only viable path? Do other convincing alternatives exist? This is the dilemma.

It is reasonable to assume that the design of the territory and its significance in terms of 'identity' and 'resources'<sup>17</sup> must have a physical basis, but this type of presentation can pose problems of being fixed. A counter-alternative to the single authoritarian image is the open series, which offers the possibility of re-framing and comparing alternative scenes. But this rhetorical solution, widely practiced and made very easy by automatic design, maintains an unaltered rapport with verisimilitude,

which is uncritical and suffers the limits of a field of exploration which is nevertheless limited (comparison makes sense if there is a restricted number of alternatives). In order to move away from these traditional solutions, it may be useful to reconsider the situationist and psycho-geographical lesson<sup>18</sup> and to look at the experiments by Kevin Lynch: the former emphasises the importance of discovery and the desecratory character of the anomalous image; the latter shake the conviction that there exists, or ought to exist, a necessary relationship between shared knowledge and a faithful image of what is seen. These are two quite interesting areas of work which, moreover, take into account various twentieth century art experiences which are difficult to relate to the traditional figurative/abstract dichotomy.<sup>19</sup> These areas are each very distant from the other, but yet converge upon one important aspect: figurative and abstract are major fields to be explored and cross-fertilised.

It is important to move within a 'figurative' world, a term which at this point has to be placed between inverted commas. The styles and communicative effects are different: images which are verist and hyperrealist, popular and naïve, poetical and fantastical or science-fictional capture varying sensibilities, creating visual impacts and stirring feelings and ideas which are different, opening up a wide range of possible themes. Different techniques also act in this direction. Photomontage and cartoons, for example, through their surprise or incredibility, are capable of creating a detachment from real things, emphasising the heuristic and temporary value of the images, their ironic power. Figurative material is used, therefore, but avoiding mimesis, producing juxtapositions which are improbable or exaggerated, desirable or to be avoided, always to be criticised. This is a way of revealing, and therefore questioning, the deceptive element which is present in every image and activating the thought process, leaving space for comparison and perhaps afterwards for technical interpretation.

All of this seems to satisfy 'honestly' the objectives of visioning: seeing from a particular point of view; imagining or hoping that things might be different from how they are; showing others what they cannot see.

Between figurative and abstract there is no division, and increasingly they coexist, producing a blend which demonstrates the inextricable relationship between visual impact and thought, between perception and intellect. Wassily Kandinsky's development towards abstraction, which the painter himself observed and conceptualised, remains paradigmatic<sup>20</sup> and helps in understanding the contemporary trend which uses concept in order to map out thoughts. This development is abstract in the sense that it selects certain aspects of reality which are often not entirely divested of their context and are ordered according to new casual nexuses, producing elementary figurative combinations which aim to represent, with a certain approximation, relevant features of the project. It is analogous because concept is not a codified representation of reality but establishes relationships of similarity with it (Lenoci, 2005). Concepts and diagrams that interpret them are presented as actual 'thought machines', instruments which are extremely elastic, capable of being precise and imprecise at the same time, of simplifying and highlighting complex phenomena, eliminating everything which is superfluous. The diagram is the specific instrument for controlling complex and innovative project processes which are progressively freed from objectives

of a formal nature and are able to produce architecture which is capable of dealing in strategic terms with uncertainty and the unexpected. The presentations of scenarios and structures 'must' reach this level of awareness, and must raise questions about what is being removed and the sense behind what is being put back in its place, about the recognisability of new territorial perceived figures introduced into the structural outline.

All of this tends to lead to a re-assessment as to the importance of the 'misunderstanding', or rather to an acceptance that it will always be there so long as 'cultures are measureless', and it becomes important to ensure that there is a space in which they can be described and compared in order to understand that they are different (La Cecla, 1997). Misunderstanding, in fact, is that communication defect which makes communication possible between different points of view, the relationship in conditions of difficulty and easy conflict. Misunderstanding can be managed by one of the two parties or by both of the parties because it is played out during the existence of the relationship. In a certain sense, its management presupposes a faith in the prolongment of the encounter, in postponement, in waiting. Misunderstandings assure the continuation of trust in the encounter, or imply its possibility. And the planning or design process is exactly like waiting for something to come true and may be realised in the future, but always in a partial and fluctuating way.

In any event, given the discussional character of the urban and territorial project, it is necessary to have a discursive framework which, based on the various kinds of visual form, is capable of assisting its interpretation and use. It is almost like building diachronic and disjointed strips, using words and rhetoric useful from time to time in relation to the context and the circumstances of the communication, to the cultural status of the interlocutors. The sequential discourse mitigates, relativizes, adjusts the meaning and the sense, multiplies the possibilities of communication, extends the number of recipients. For this reason it has to be planned and observed in its effects, taking care with the generative capability of misunderstandings.

## Conclusions

Concluding I want to fix the key points that could qualify a practical perspective for visual communication.

Communication in urban planning and design is particular and problematic not only because of the coexistence of different communicators and various recipients, but also because of a wide range of contextual factors which require specific and detailed communication projects.

Communication, representation, and presentation, which are relevant questions in the interaction, partially overlap even if they work in different ways having different central purposes. Urban planners and designers should consider the complexity of their interconnections to avoid two easy derives: a banal publicity approach or agnostic translations of data into maps.

Scenarios, visions, and images, three recurrent modes to communicate the future in contemporary urban planning and design, need 'figures' to give a visual configuration to the change, through metaphors too. Effective figures can become a crucial synthesis to present content of projects and plans, also suggesting their meaning and sense. The forms of presentation

are today highly different from the past and an extraordinary range of visual solutions offers the opportunity to choose the most effective solution each time.

Technicians should design their presentations (not only their projects and plans) as products linked to society, taking care with their necessity, legibility, relevance, and meaningfulness. Map-charts, outlines, and manifestos seem to be the most interesting forms for an innovative practice. Exploring the various possibilities of 'figurative' and 'abstract' drawings, presentations can become every time new visual discourses able to communicate projects and plans to inhabitants, administrators, politicians, and all concerned people.

## Notes

1. The general and specific relevance of visible texts regarding contemporary communication is developed by Colombo and Eugeni (1996).
2. The representation/presentation of Rome General Regulatory Plan (Prg, 1999-2001) was an occasion for one of the first complex communication experiences. It, in fact, took place in a context populated by an unusually high number of people with a variety of objectives, skills and backgrounds, without any particular knowledge about matters relating to the elaboration of visual texts. This environment, moreover, was subject to frequent requests to publicise/exhibit work in progress, therefore driven simultaneously by internal and external communication demands. The construction of a common layout and some basic graphic rules, for which it has been decided to work together with a communication expert, can be regarded as the first significant step. The planning over time of a series of joint solutions was intended to satisfy internal requirements (guaranteeing the passage among many transmitters in the simulation by computer), and to construct a recognisable image for the project. Some typical questions, such as the identification of the objectives being pursued by the project designers and the presumed expectations of the primary recipients, have led to plates being distinguished according to the kind of representation (iconic, conventional, mixed), scale, legend, cartographic base, chromatic connotation. An ample presentation of the work carried out in Rome by the Plan design research group is to be found in Gabellini (2001b).
3. To deepen the question of iconism is fundamental to understand the sense of the shift toward ideogrammatic drawings. See for that: Volli, 1974; Gombrich, 1975; Eco, 1979a, 1979b; Calabrese, 1980, 1982, 1988.
4. The distinction between reception and perception relates to the explanation by Anceschi (1999): the word 'optical' is used in reference to physical and physiological phenomena of seeing, in other words to the mechanisms and sense of sight. On the other hand, 'visual' is used in reference to perception, not to the passive and receptive component of vision but to the psychological, active and selective aspects of seeing.
5. With reference to the 'perceived structure' of a territory and its design, Kevin Lynch (1984) suggests that it could relate to the character of principal centres, visual points of reference, districts and their communication connections, and could offer a strategy which relates to how these characteristics and connections should subsequently evolve. It is therefore a design, which fixes the essential elements and favours openness toward new interpretative opportunities, which is at the same time vague and adherent. In the same way that topography is the project base of an area, these images should be the design base of the structural designs, in that they can be relied upon to give guidance in daily conversation and citizens can take part in creating them, acquiring knowledge about inventions and new forms. Lynch is a reference to understand the relevance of a 'perceived figure' (Gabellini, 2024).
6. In my book *Tecniche urbanistiche* (Gabellini, 2001a), in relation to the coordinated image, I made the suggestion of establishing a recognisable relationship between the used scales of representation and the way in which the territorial area was arranged, studying the relative formats;

unifying the cartographic bases in order to assist the cross-scale interpretation of the territorial area; studying the graphic outlines, then the position and size of the main presentation, of the key, of the general heading and of the large quantity of other accompanying information; choosing the font and type size; designing with care the accompanying key (hierarchy, relationship between signs and meanings) always giving them the importance that they require in accordance with the role they play; 'working' the cartographic base so that it is of fundamental importance for avoiding distractions; choosing carefully the colour range of the drawings; distinguishing the various kinds of illustrations.

7. 'Innate' or 'natural' because it is widely shared and because it is quickly developed in the individual, while 'cultural' because it is acquired through training and experience.

8. Franco Farinelli has repeatedly referred to the inhumanity of mapping. See, *inter alia*, Farinelli, 1976; Farinelli, 1992; Farinelli, 1994.

9. It seems to me that this use 'pro-tempore' of the composite word assists in understanding the literature on mapping in order to highlight the use and potential of this practice. See also Corner, 1999.

10. For the relationship between image and word, I refer to Barthes, 1967; Shapiro, 1973; Massironi, 1982.

11. Sketches are difficult forms of drawings, rarely observed specifically because they are resistant to attempts at taxonomic interpretation, are considered to be an expression of creative activity, of an interior world to be explored, preferably, with the help of a psychoanalyst. See, for example, the analysis conducted by Pierrette Lavanchy on sketches and doodles in the notebooks of Franco Fortini: Lavanchy, 1996.

12. Following and adapting the suggestions of Anceschi, 1992.

13. I proposed this classification in Gabellini, 1999.

14. Recognised and confirmed in Secchi, 1984.

15. If man is forced, since the times of Aurignacian graffiti, or the caves of Altamira, to produce a mimetic specular image of all that surrounded him, obsessed him, of all that he encountered, this may mean that, upon the very basis of the presence of his peculiar neuron structures, man presents, at the base of his cognitive (but also his emotive and sentimental) evolution, a physiological characteristic which 'imposes' mimesis upon him (even if entirely unknowingly). Such mimesis is not limited only to the neurospecular aspect referred to above, but extends to the entire historical and anthropological – and therefore aesthetic – story of Humanity (Dorfles, 2008).

16. In the perceptive process, brought into action in front of pictures, subjects do not distinguish what they perceive by nature and what they perceive by culture, they do not distinguish into information which is organised consciously and that which is organised unconsciously. Cultural (acquired) knowledge and natural (innate) knowledge are not therefore recognisable on the basis of distinctive properties, but because they correspond to various levels of an organisation in which the upper levels are built upon those below. We describe the lower levels as natural because they are broadly shared and appear at an early stage of human development. We describe the higher levels as cultural because they are less widely shared and appear later (Bonfantini, Zingale, 1999). The correct relationship between novelty and ease of understanding is at the basis of all aesthetic pleasure, since an excess of novelty in the work makes it impossible, or too difficult, to understand and enjoy, whereas an excessive ease of understanding (or familiarity) renders the work of scarce interest and deprives it of all interest: too much novelty leads to incomprehension, too much ease of understanding leads to disattention, whereas moderate novelty creates interest and moderate ease of understanding allows a sufficient enjoyment (Dorfles, 2008).

17. Terms used by Alberto Magnaghi's research group, which is very aware of questions relating to representation. See Magnaghi, 2007; Poli, 2005a; Poli, 2005b; Gabellini, 2025.

18. See Careri, 2001 on *New Babylon* by Constant Nieuwenhuys, which bring together situationist *dérives* and psychogeological syntheses.

19. The introductory text by Omar Calabrese for the exhibition dedicated to imaginary maps by Twentieth century and contemporary painters

(*Estetica dei non luoghi. Voi (non) siete qui/Aesthetics of non places. You are (not) here*, Cortenuova, 21 September-24 December 2006) is very interesting. The careful examination of the works on show, imaginary works ranging between veridiction and simulation, lead Calabrese to identify various strategies for considering the geographic map and to place them along an axis which moves uninterruptedly from figurative to informal abstract, in order to give a narrative character to mapping (Bettini, Calabrese, 2006).

20. The exhibition at the Tate Modern Gallery in London (22 June – 1 October 2006) on the work of Kandinsky and entitled *The path to abstraction* is very interesting in this respect. The succession of paintings moves from the 'naturalistic' landscapes of the early 1900s to the compositions of the 1920s. From the very beginning, his depiction of reality is simplified, inspired by a popular, childlike perception, prepared to distort and move toward abstraction. The distinction which Kandinsky himself made between his works – 'impressions', 'improvisations', 'compositions' – makes it possible to discern moments in that development which are often indistinct and indistinguishable, which move from natural to cultural, from emotion to reason, from unconscious to aware, with a conceptual power that becomes gradually stronger. In his compositions the structural elements, recognized and disassembled, are reassembled in a new order, producing entirely new figures, combining abstract forms and figured details.

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