

## Municipal Development Plan, Acerra (Naples)

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### ABSTRACT

*The Municipal Development Plan (Piano Urbanistico Comunale - PUC) of Acerra has been drafted by a group of young professionals and researchers, led by Leonardo Benevolo, in accordance with the guidelines laid out by Regional Law no. 16 of 2004. Its complex drafting process was compressed into a brief, nine-month period in 2008 and 2009, at the end of which its initial adoption (or “predisposizione” – “preparation” or “predisposition” – in Italian legal terms) was ratified by the municipal council. This article reconstructs the key moments, illustrating the main elements of the plan and how the debate about it took shape both inside and outside the municipal administration.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Acerra plan was formulated by roughing out the original planning concept which, sketched out on a sheet of tracing paper, survived through to the end and was eventually endorsed in the definitive version and confirmed by the countless formalities imposed by regional law. The “sketch”

introduces the terms of the debate, the “words” of the plan which is today being discussed by the entire city (55,000 inhabitants with 675 observations made on the plan as drafted). These are some of the “figures” so well known to modern city planning: the “crown” that circumscribes and defines the city, the “network” of parks and of transit routes that find their way through the mesh of buildings linking through to the surrounding territory; the “hortus” in its various nuances as: a) an “enclosure” – the “compartments” of suburban transformation; b) a “castrum” – the ancient city, which in the case of Acerra is the Roman town; c) a “cultivated space”, or countryside, poised between production and abandon, economic activities, scenic resources, and a dumping ground to be reclaimed. These words have very much become part of the local vocabulary (so there is now talk of “compartments” rather than of “amnesty” and this is in itself a result achieved by the plan), and they are used in a debate that is technical and yet also political. This means it has become an element of interaction and discussion, opposition and agreement among the local community, the municipal administration and the other institutions involved. The drafting of the plan has been accompanied by an inclusive process of participation, in order to encourage contributions and bring together consent. The “figure” allows the town planner, the politician, and the citizen to talk the same language and not to dilute the debate by talking of building indexes and zones (this was the toughest challenge) but of concrete concepts concerning the form and functioning of the city.

## **1. METHODOLOGICAL REFERENCES AND A SEARCH FOR OVERALL MEANING CONSTITUTED THE STARTING POINT**

The plan was built up along traditional lines: a political/planning document of administration guidelines, the drafting of a Preliminary Document of the plan in order to facilitate discussion with the principals and with the city, and then the drafting of the actual plan itself. All this was squeezed into a particularly short period, for 9 months was all it took to go from the assignment to the adoption (“*predisposizione*” in the words of the regional town-planning law of Campania) of the plan by the municipal council. The previous situation of the municipality had been particularly grim: the applicable town plan of 1982 was largely disregarded as concerned the

creation of infrastructures and services, while the building quantities – even though covered by subsequent detailed plans and area development plans – went ahead on successive, more or less random and entirely independent addenda, both in the areas covered by the plan and in “spontaneous” areas. As regards the historical areas, it is sufficient to say that the current plan restricts Zone A solely to the Castello Baronale, completely ignoring all the other parts of the ancient *castrum*. The result is a chaotic urban system, with serious deficiencies in the infrastructure, even of a primary nature, and in the facilities required for public services in general. The technical department of the municipality has not been issuing building permits for some years now, as the conditions called for in para. 2, Art. 12 of the Presidential Decree no. 380 (existence of primary urbanisation) do not exist.

In such a condition, the first question concerns the very rationale behind planning: what might the sense of a general-level town-planning instrument be? How is it possible to help improve a difficult existing situation without worsening it even further with new elements of confusion?

The situation in Naples has not suffered from a lack of planning but, if anything, from the unsuccessful refinement of the various planning instruments that have followed on one after the other – there are countless cases of plans that have fallen by the wayside – to say nothing of their actual implementation. Acerra has some singular features in the otherwise undifferentiated panorama of the hinterland around Naples:

1. a geographical situation of great importance, which underscores its great scenic value, for it is at the foot of the first spurs of the Partenio mountains, dominated in the immediate background by the presence of the Somma-Vesuvius volcano;
2. a vast wealth of areas still largely – and miraculously – free around the city, as a result of the historic reclamation of the Clanio, based around the system of the Regi Lagni which still stops it from blending into the dense metropolitan area;
3. the presence of a central historical area of huge importance, despite its agricultural origins, laid out on the site of the ancient Roman *castrum*, and the episcopal seat, which still attests to its symbolic significance;
4. the presence of an important archaeological area around the ancient city of Suessula, with important remains such as the Casina Spinelli;

5. the prospects offered by the fact that it is in the immediate vicinity of the high-speed train gateway station at Afragola and of an infrastructural crossroads of huge importance: the Circumvesuviana railway and the State rail network, the Asse Mediano and the Asse di Supporto road systems, etc.

On these bases, and still with potential room for manoeuvre, it appears to us that it is possible to create a town-planning system that could have some possibility of making a positive contribution, even though there are undeniable critical aspects: the lack of basic services, widespread unauthorised building, environmental pollution, production platforms of extraordinary intervention in the Mezzogiorno (the so-called ASI areas), etc.

## **2. THE PROCESS OF FORMULATING THE PLAN**

The commissioning authority adopted a neutral stance right from the outset: the guidelines approved by the council were the mandate on the basis of which the appointed experts “were left to work”. They provided the general framework for the primary planning instruments and indicated the key issues that the new municipal urban plan (PUC) would need to tackle: protection and redevelopment of the territory; integration of infrastructure and facilities, regulatory updates.



*Figure 1 – Municipal Urban Plan (PUC) of Acerra: the preliminary draft.*

The approach was naturally more one of drawing up a list than of identifying the actual solutions or possible town-planning measures that might be introduced, and the issues were treated in a fairly generic manner. It left room for the hope that the current state of affairs can be reversed, particularly as regards the failure to implement plans for infrastructure and facilities, and that mechanisms can be found for reclaiming areas of unauthorised construction and integration with the established city. It also clearly revealed the difficulties caused by the fundamental freezing of the building industry (at least the legal sector) caused by the failure to issue building permits. In essence, what is required is the restoration of urban dignity but also a return to a “normal” situation, in which “acquired building rights” can be implemented on the ground.

Apart from these indications, the proposed plan was built up piece by piece, with each one being constantly discussed with the local community through a participatory process that involved the entire city, encouraging people to talk, and listening to them, and ultimately bringing together all their various opinions concerning its present and future image.

As a whole, the participatory process of the Acerra plan constituted a singular form of learning about the local situation, and in particular about the way the inhabitants view the various problems, as well as a means of creating consent around the plan. It consisted of three successive phases: an initial phase of active listening, with an “internal” campaign of interviews of those directly involved in drafting the PUC and an “external” one of those with collective interests, with the aim of identifying the image – or images – of the city in the minds of its inhabitants. The first phase ended with the handing over of the preliminary plan (which was presented at a public conference, in the presence of the city and provincial authorities) which, as an informal document, assisted in guiding the discussion. Based on the issues raised in the preliminary plan, the second phase involved organising focus groups for the associations and interest groups, who discussed the planning guidelines, and collecting the suggestions and reactions their discussions led to. The third phase had the aim of drawing up possible alternative scenarios, to be discussed before the PUC found the solutions that were introduced into the final version. During this phase, consultations were held with the social, cultural, economic-professional, trade-union, and

environmental organisations referred to in Art. 24 of Regional Law 16/2004. Quite apart from the formal outcomes and planning ideas that, even though in a fragmentary manner, this led to, the participatory process helped raise awareness among the population about the fact that the plan was being drafted, and to some extent this facilitated the subsequent discussions about the proposals (the “figures” of the plan).

The planning process has always kept the sphere of technical – town-planning – management strictly separate from that of the political management of the plan.

Starting out from a sort of case history, gradually improved by investigations and the acquisition of data, and an initial hypothesis to provide a formal explanation of the complexity of the territory, an attempt has been made to portray the real situation of the territory in an image that is also one of a development option, in a figure that unravels its meaning and makes it communicable. An image, therefore, that brings together the present-day city, as a complex, multidisciplinary organism, and the future city, as it might be or as it might be hoped for. In other words, a “sketch” in the traditional sense, capable of intuitively establishing the terms of the issue – the “words” of the plan – which are really the words which the entire city of Acerra (55,000 inhabitants, 675 observations presented in the draft plan) uses in the discussion.

By using this image of Acerra – not real, but possible – experts, politicians and citizens can talk the same language, framing the debate not just around “building indexes” and “zones” (this was the greatest challenge) but also by introducing concrete concepts about the form and functioning of the city, and by reflecting on the territorial scene that defines its own action, qualifying and obstructing it, and on the possible outcomes that it can lead to.



*Figure 2 – Simulation of the plan.*

As well as through direct interaction between principals and experts, the relations involving the plan and the world of politics thus took place in non-traditional ways and places, experimenting a method which made it possible to ascertain what the city expected from the plan and to extract indications that could be used to adjust the decisions that had guided the drafting of the plan. The provisional result that was achieved does not allow for a complete assessment: the complex process of drafting the plan has so far been characterised by the synergy between planning and “politics”, in its broadest sense, and the result is there for all to judge. The final outcome remains to be seen<sup>1</sup>, together with the operative aspects that the plan will bring to bear.

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1 The plan was adopted by the council as the incumbent administration's final act in February 2009. It was then published and observations collected, and counter-proposals drafted. The next administration did not conclude the procedures for approving the plan and management is currently in the hands of a commissioner.

The procedure described reveals a “plan style” in which town planning is viewed in its disciplinary essence as capable of bringing about mindful changes in cities and territories, with a level of awareness that comes from precise analytical stages, using instruments entirely inherent in the discipline. These are scientific and, as such, objective, but in order to be effective they require agreement on the recapitulation and decisions need to be made, and this can only be achieved by reducing the “background noise” until an “eloquent silence”, which is essential for communication, has been reached.

In the case of Acerra, this procedure is illustrated by the decision to offer the city – by means of the Preliminary Document – an image of the plan that brings together those “figures” that are typical of modern town-planning: a “crown”, which delimits and defines the city; the “network”, of parks and mobility, which finds its way through the built-up areas, linking to the environmental system at the territorial level; a “hortus”, in its various nuances as: a) an “enclosure” – the compartments of suburban transformation; b) a “*castrum*” – the ancient city, which in the case of Acerra is the Roman town; c) a “cultivated space”, or countryside, poised between production and abandon, economic activities, scenic resources, and a dumping ground to be reclaimed.

These “figures” have become very much part of the local vocabulary (and indeed there is now talk of “compartments” rather than of “amnesty” and this is in itself a result achieved by the plan), and they are used in a debate that is technical and yet also political, which means it has become an element of interaction and discussion, opposition and agreement among the local community, the municipal administration and the other institutions involved.

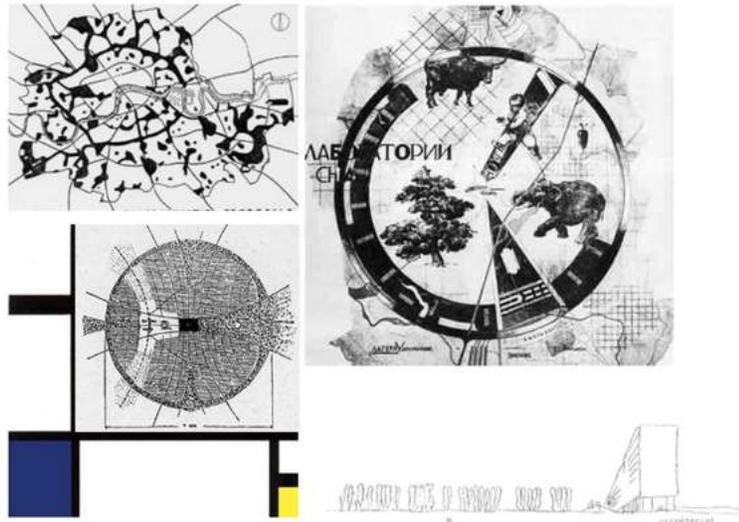


Figure 3 – The crown, disciplinary references.

The crown – or “cartwheel”, as some local politicians disparagingly began referring to it right from the first times it was presented in public – is infrastructure at the territorial level, and a sort of “ring with breadth”, which is at once a road, a large park with facilities that sends its green wedges into the built-up areas, and a new building principle that takes concrete form in constructing low but continuous buildings along the edges. Like Taut’s Stadtkrone or Abercrombie’s Green Belt, the crown encircles the sprawl, creating a border between its present ramifications and the countryside – an empty border (currently consisting mainly of uncultivated land, partly divided into lots and ready to be built on) to be acquired for the public and incorporated into the city as a large park. The crown is created in “compartments” – portions of territory to which a building index is applied. In this case it is low, and takes the form of equalised land-use quite independently from the actual use of the plot (which is the same if it is to be built with homes, or used for a road or a public park). The belt consists of eight very large compartments which require the contemporaneous building of a road, homes, parks and services. Their implementation is a complex matter and would require the setting up of a public or public-private organisation (an urban transformation firm) capable of designing and completing the works and putting them on the market. The crown is the

future that the town planners want for Acerra, but it is not necessarily what is wanted by the inhabitants and by the politicians, who hope to gather consent. They would all like to continue building detached houses incrementally, as additions to the current urban structure, and in this gap – between the experts’ perception of the “common good” and that of some of the city administrators and of small landholders in the suburbs – we find widespread prejudice about “tower blocks fencing the city” and the new belt system as a “barrier” that stifles development. This deadlock is broken when the administrators manage to convey the new building index in conceptual terms and sell it to their citizens/voters: even though small, and not useable without the others (and thus on condition that the parkway and facilities are made at the same time), “it’s always better than the current situation, with all the plots agricultural and thus with no index at all”. Those with decision-making powers, and those who lobby the landowners and the companies, can accept the crown: there are still calls for the “wheel to have more spokes” (in other words, to have smaller building sectors) but in actual fact everyone has started placing this figure of the plan – which is seen as unusual yet less and less alien – at the heart of the debate. At least momentarily, the crown is the image of a future Acerra and, even though it is still treated with the greatest suspicion, it has nevertheless entered the city’s mindset.

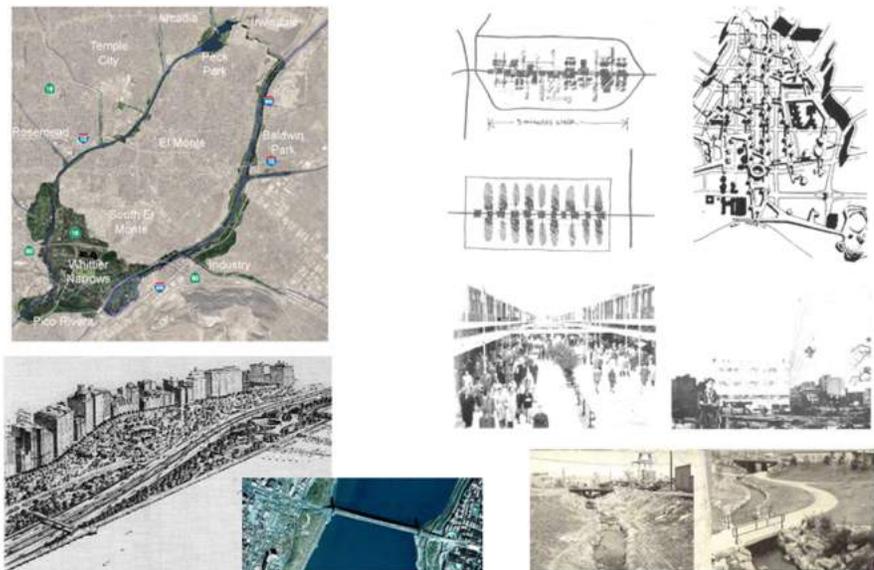


Figure 4 – The network: disciplinary references.

The network, on the other hand, is the set of routes that form a system between the existing urban elements and those of the new crown and the open territory beyond. It consists of:

1. greenways (old railway lines to be cleared, canal banks to be reclaimed, and the course of the water supply system that leads into the heart of the regional park of the Partenio);
2. the parkway of the city belt;
3. a complex, ramified system of empty spaces and urban kitchen gardens which form a sort of web between the patchy fabric of the city, creating an unbroken system of open public spaces: district parks, playgrounds, avenues, squares, etc.



Figure 5 – The greenways.

As a complete, ordered space, the *hortus* is primarily the *castrum* (Roman Acerrae) analysed and normed on a detailed level on the basis of land-registry comparisons and on-site inspections. The *hortus* is actually a centuriated landscape, broken up into a number of units and partly destined to a sort of reforestation, with the aim of achieving a different form of

landscape capable of combining reclamation – for example, providing detailed information on over a hundred isolated artefacts, which are also analytically censused – and new ecological equilibriums. Lastly, the *hortus* includes the need to rearrange what already exists, by providing planimetric and volumetric configurations for many areas of completion in the suburbs, interpreting positions, forcing alignments, working on the dynamic balance that alludes to order, and interpreting fragments of reality without repudiating the significance of the parts in a rational vision of the whole.



*Figure 6 – Detailed regulations for the historic central area.*



Figure 7 – Regulations for the historic farms.

A significant part of the work on the “*hortus*” concerns the design of the areas referred to in the previous town-planning scheme as planned public services and thus subject to expropriation. As is so often the case elsewhere, the planning of services in Acerra has not kept up with the construction of private buildings, thus leading to a sense of decay and incompleteness that can be seen in many parts of the city. In view of the limited building completions, the plan has chosen to apply an equalising discipline to these areas in order to ensure the creation of the infrastructure required for the planned transformations and to compensate for previous deficiencies. In order to visualise the required result and to make the plan truly feasible, a detailed project has been included, in order to orient subsequent planning levels.



Figure 8 – Equalising compartments.

### **3. A PROVISIONAL ASSESSMENT**

No complete assessment of this experience can be yet been made because, as mentioned above, the (extremely cumbersome) process of perfecting and approving the plan is still under way. From a professional point of view, this has been a satisfying experience: the creation of this urbanistic instrument within a reasonable time, without being subject to particular pressures, and the end result correspond to the guidelines – and expectations – laid out right from the time of the Preliminary Document.

Relations with local politics – at least as regards the contact persons in the administration in office while the plan was being drafted – were correct and profitable, with roles clearly defined and distinct. There have been many opportunities for discussion with the commissioning administration and with the city, and generally speaking they were closely focused on the main figures of the plan. The delays in the procedure for the approval of the plan and thus the inevitable uncertainty about the result led to an involution of the debate in the city, in which there was once again talk of an amnesty for infringements of building regulations, of means for partially varying the town-planning regulations in force, of a housing plan, and so on.

One of the most important results of the drafting of a town plan – and, from some points of view, even more important than the plan itself – was the support given to the process and the professional development of the municipal technical department, which took good advantage of the opportunity to gain knowledge of the town-planning system and to become autonomous in its management of the future changes that will need to be made. In this case, the municipal technical department played an active part in the process of drafting the plan, with mutual advantages that have emerged also in the quality of town-planning decisions. The unfortunately customary disproportion between the issues to be dealt with and the number of people involved prevented the results from being even better, and this is hardly reassuring for the future. If approved, the Acerra plan – and, one might say, any good plan – needs to be managed by a technical department within the administration, with specific tasks separated out from those of everyday management, capable of dealing with the transformation processes

and able to monitor the overall functioning of the plan in order to detect any need for corrective action and to apply it when necessary. This should be one of the main concerns of those involved in this sector.

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