DOWNSIZING DETROIT: RESHAPING DETROIT O RESHAPING PLANNING?

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Abstract

Detroit: the images and numbers of the crisis of a city and an economic system have fed up the pages of local, national and international news during the last two years. In fact, the city has become the symbol of how a city can 'die'.

Actually this situation is not a recent one, dating since the sixties and seventies. But the recent economical crisis has particularly exacerbated the frailty of this, as many other cities in the American rust-belt. Press and media have grasped the importance of the case, providing chronicles of a dramatic urban condition, but also chronicles of research and projects, public and private, of ways to get out of the crisis. These include on the one side a particularly striking revival of the practice of urban agriculture, which has brought to the light the traditional role of this economic activity in the history of American cities, but also a challenging way to stress the same idea of "city" and the relation between "city" and "growth". On the other side this process is dealing with the challenged role of planning: where on the one side there is a new federal urban agenda, with a revived central action proposed by President Obama, and on the other a local administration, with a major, like Bing, which is proposing uneven programs to contrast foreclosures effects and dealing with NGOs action in order to save the city.

The paper will discuss the case under two perspectives .

The first is related to the reinvention of city-ness, in which the city is engaged. Where the city-ness (Brenner, 2009), is what makes a city such a place, livable and vivid (a "city that works", is the title of Major David Bing): which kind of city-ness for Detroit ? which kind of city-ness for the city after the crisis? What is the role of urban and nonurban, of density and proximity? All traditional urban paradigms seem in fact to be at stake. The second is about "planning": what is the role that planning can play and which challenges to planning is the financial crisis urban effects proposing?

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1. Introduction: Cities under the current economic crisis.

Considering the 2011 Mc Kinsey report (2010), more than half of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) produced in the entire world during 2007 has been generated by the economies of 600 cities, where approximately 22% of world population lives. The first 100 world cities in 2007 have produced the 38% of the world GDP; projections over 2025 contained in the same report assumed that more than 25% of world population would be concentrated in those 600 cities, engines of the entire economy, raising to 60% the share of the world GDP they would produce. During 2007, and more evidently during 2008, a large, sprawled financial and economic crisis has produced significant changes, as well as, the projections over the future and the paths of growths assumed for the future of the urban economies. From many points of view, the global economic crisis exploded in 2007 created a reduction of jobs and wealth in 7 out of 8 cities of the OECD countries. according to the GLOBALMETRO MONITOR 2011 Report (2010), (written by the Brookings Institute in cooperation with the "Cities Programme" sponsored by the London School of Economics), less than half of the examined 200 metropolitan areas increased their economic conditions if compared to the data before the crisis began.

The economic crisis that hit the world started from a financial crisis and it boomed when this latter touched the real estate market, first and above all the residential real estate market, something evidently connected to the idea of urban development in the last century. In fact since the beginning of the new century, many urban areas and systems around the world have pushed the local economy, supporting with low interests mortgages and huge public investments the transformation and growth of many urban environments, confirming to many national economies that urban areas and cities were able to boost the economy of the whole country. After the beginning of the crisis, this system began to be under pressure; the effects are now evident in several cities, deeply affecting their processes of growth and development.

The recent international literature has started reflecting upon the role that cities have played and are now playing during the financial crisis. At least, two points of view emerge: for many scholars urban development and growth are still the only possible answers to economic and financial crisis and the city is destined to play a key role in the economic recovering (Glaeser); on the opposite side, for many others authors urban development and many contemporary urban environments are responsible for the size of the crisis and cities are required to rethink their role accordingly to a different development model (Harvey, 2008). In both cases cities are central again, even if regarded as problems or solutions (Donzelot, 2008).

If the crisis generated different effects and different reactions in the western world urban environments, at the same time, also the answers and the solutions urban planning and planning policies gave to the crisis have been different. In any case it can be stated in this perspective, that not only cities have been questioned and

stressed by the crisis, but also urban planning is being questioned. Considering all the differences, it is possible to say that several fundamental pillars of contemporary urban planning are challenged by the current economical crisis: among those, we could consider, just as an example, the mechanisms and tools of public –private partnership. Lack of resources from the public sectors on the one side, involved in investing its limited resources to assist emergent social troubles, and lack of convenience on the other in investing in urban development processes from the entrepreneurs' point of view, together with a general reduction of the possibilities to borrow money, put into crisis this XX century mechanism. This sufferance is blocking many urban regeneration or redevelopment projects and shelved many sectors of the constructions processes, showing even in this case how weak was the world of contractors and builders, pushed to grow in the precedent lucky period but too weak to bear the new crisis. All the factors that helped the building sector to be one of the main actor on stage of the previous period of urban growth are now in sufferance, and the engine of urban development slowed its run, putting urban environments in a new condition of projects stalled, stopped, abandoned.

Simultaneously, therefore a new big pressure over urban planning started: urban planning is supposed, much more than in the recent past, to be able to address, if not to solve the problems, and find a way out the crisis. On the one side, as in previous crisis, public works are seen as a way-out of the crisis: on the other side planning can be considere a way to produce new courses of action and new common frameworks against uncertainties, both for public and private actors, both for citizens and economic actors.

Nevertheless planning is not at ease in this situation, since some of the tools on which it has based its approach to urban problems in the last decades can no more be taken for granted; at the same time the crisis is producing further effects on some of the most relevant and well-known problems of contemporary city (growing dualisation, for example), paradoxically lowering down others (the environmental dimension, or traffic congestion). This opens up the possibility, as in every crisis, to reverse the perspective and produce important innovations. As a matter of fact, if 1929 crisis has fostered the introduction of social welfare in developed countries, and the 1973 crisis fostered a renewed attention to environmental issues, we could expect that the current crisis could offer new space for innovation. Under which perspective it's hard to say: nevertheless we could try to contribute to this moment challenges, adopting a challenging perspective towards the contemporary urban question (Secchi, 2011, 2010) and the role planning and public policies can play.

In order to do that the paper selects a case study, which is considered interesting under many respects, even if not exemplar or exhaustive, because of its specificities.

The city of Detroit is in fact the object of this paper. The city has been at the centre of many attentions since many years under a more general perspective of

investigation on urban crisis; as such it is considered since quite a long time as the symbol of urban decay and urban crisis in American literature. Already in bad economic conditions since the sixties, the city suffered even more from 2008 and for the global crisis, that speeded up the process of abandoning homes and neighbourhoods, whose mortgages in many cases were no more affordable for residents.

The focus of the paper is twofold: on the one side the first paragraph presents reflections concerning the process of downsizing of the city, which has naturally occurred in the last decades and has been assumed as a general aim of the new urban policies of the Mayor Bing. The demographic size of the city has in fact been consistently changing in the last decades, producing a process of physical shrinking that is leaving many parts of the city without any kind of use; from an industrial metropolis to a strange discontinuous combination of CBD and suburbs, the physical downsizing of the city has become a central slogan for the preparation of the new plan. Actually "downsizing" Detroit, means at the same time reshaping the city, redefining its form and role: thinking the city form and the urban space and organization in a new way for a different population and for different uses from the consolidated ones. But how can a city like Detroit can be reshaped? If "downsizing" in fact can be more simple to be achieved, bulldozing entire neighbourhoods abandoned by people and activities reshaping the city is a hard task. Not only in terms of the form of the built environment, but also in terms of the entire urban organization.

In order to "reshape" Detroit a process of revision of the urban plan has been seen as the right solution to address the problems of the city. Actually two years after the decision to produce a new plan to reshape the city, taken by the mayor Bing, it became clear that in order to reshape the city (and not just to downsize it) a normal plan process could not be effective and a reshaping of planning itself was necessary. Also in order to address some of the long-term problems that the city has accumulated during the century, which have to do, not only with the economical crisis, but with the way in which the city has developed during the last century in relation with the urban region it is part of. As it is demonstrated by the fact, that, while the economic seems to be recovering, the city is now still living a very dramatic moment.

2.1 The recent past: a city too big for its population

In the last 50 years, Detroit has lost more or less one million of residents, about 57% of its population before the trend started. Many other Northern US cities have lost population during the last 50 years, as a national trend of residents moving from the historic cities to the suburbs, or to more economical and fiscal attractive cities. Many cities have seen numbers declining, and people moving out to find new jobs, new urban environments or new opportunities, but Detroit’s trend cannot be seen, studied and considered as part of a national trend. Its

exception is easily analyzable: the increase of population loss has been so evident in the last 10 years, that the recent Major Bing question:"who will live here?" has been the most justified question at the beginning of his job in 2010. Not considering here the trends of population mobility and population transformations, the most relevant aspect of this change has been the physical transformation of the city: when residents left, they left their homes and their neighborhoods so empty that more than 40 squares miles of urbanized and urban lands where considered in 2010 completely empty and no more lived by anybody. A size as large as San Francisco urban area[3]. In the two years between 2010 and 2012, these completely empty urban lands generated a big loss of employments, with more than 24% of unemployment rate, a number particularly high if compared to the national level of 9% of unemployment during the same years.

The crisis that hit the city comes from the very specific way in which the last 100 years have pumped it up very quickly, and then, as quickly as before, history has deflated it. Together with the fast growth of the automobile industry and its related world, Detroit grew and flourished maybe more than many other cities in the US, becoming the symbol of a town able to grow at the same pace than the main industries that shaped its urban environment. A well designed city center, a rationalized system of neighborhoods in between the city center and the industrial belt, a world-known designer for its major park, made the city of Detroit a symbol of how an industrial town can be attractive and economically very productive.

After few years, considering how long is human settlements history, and more or less in 30 years, Detroit became a different symbol, absorbing all the bad of economic changes that affected western world during the passage from fordist to post-fordist economy. The book "Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit" (Sugrue, T.J., 1996) focused on what was already happening more that 15 years ago and it is considered nowadays as one of the most brilliant and evident study about the so called "narrative of failures", addressing in particular urban policies failure. So, after having been a symbol of economic growth, with the same evocative power, Detroit has been described already more that 15 years ago as the symbol of a failure and today we can easily say that the image of Detroit is the example of Northern American urban policies failure. The urban crisis began to hit the Central Business District, and it became worldly renowned for its being able to close historic buildings, to leave abandoned masterpieces of past architecture and to keep value away from the most central and prestigious part of the central city and its downtown areas. Above all, many people, in a typical American way of facing troubles, considered first of all the city as a economic environment, and they judged it so unable to regain its past position to look for a different future without it, leaving it and searching for applications and jobs elsewhere.

2.2 The present: a shrinking city

[3] www.detroitworkprojects.com

This crisis in fact generated, soon after the reduction of the central city values, the continuous loss of population in the suburbs: it became thus evident that the entire city of Detroit was on the center of a stronger catastrophic phenomenon. All the urban aspects of the city are now under a particular attack: no people enough to populate commercial and recreational activities, no more city dwellers enough to live in the built up spaces, no more citizens enough to use public facilities and services or to claim the use of them.

Once again, many North American cities have lived such a dramatic change: from the rusty belt to upper New York State, the effect of economic changes has hit the central business district first and the inner residential city soon after. Cities like Albany, NY, Buffalo, NY, Rochester, NY, Cleveland, OH, Toledo, OH, even Chicago, IL have seen a decline of population in the city center and soon after in the first residential belts around it, seeing at the same time new suburbs flourishing as a different place to live and work.

In Detroit, for the first time in the urban American history, the city showed that even the suburbs where affected by the same problems and processes of abandon. Residents and users left the suburbs, the highways, the shopping complexes and the industrial areas. For the first time, Detroit showed that the crisis was so deep that even the physical result of the American Dream wasn't strong enough to resist, and the combination of residential suburbs, highways and commercial strips was about to surrender to the crisis.

We can easily argue that this aspect was not the core of the crisis, but only one of its aspects. The core of the crisis, clear in the way it emptied suburbs and highways, was the failure of the public policies of urban renewal mainly focused on the regeneration of urban central areas. Detroit and its crisis showed clearly that the crisis was able to hit a urban and territorial typology such as the suburbs at the same speed that was revealed when the suburbs where planned and built. The loss of population left abandoned the sprawled city keeping away very quickly the fragile sense underneath the origin of suburbs themselves.

In this way, and under these forces, the city began to shrink.

It is not the first time in human history, and in the history of cities, that a shrinking of the whole size of the city happens: European medieval cities were smaller that Roman Empire towns and villages; Colonial South American establishments were more than half of the pre Colombian cities. But the shrinking forces that affected Detroit showed for the first time in the US history that a modern city can be smaller instead of being larger; that suburbs can be the most awful places to be instead the epitomes of the American Dream; that urban renewal policies cannot be effective by default, resulting otherwise in a huge waste of money and time, that traditional planning is not able to cope with such a situation; in general that a certain kind of reasoning, adopted by a city (people, as well as politicians and economic actors) cannot address similar processes of change without a changed perspective.

At the beginning of 2010 the situation of the city was evident, well known and already so studied to be able to produce graphics, data, images, analysis absolutely clear: the economic change that affected the way productive processes re organized themselves during the 80's and the 90's generated huge changes in the economic organization of Detroit industrial economy, first of all reducing the first and most important product the Detroit engine was able to produce, automobile. And bringing together down to the paths of crisis the specific urban environment created by that world, suburbs and generally speaking, sprawled city.

In "Leaner, greened Detroit" (American Institute of Architects, Sustainable Design Assessment Team, 2008) this situation was already well described and evident, even if with a strange feeling, considering Detroit' situation as something that could always happen and as something a city can avoid easily, investing in its fundamentals and in its DNA's aspects. Detroit population in 2008 was around 800.000 residents, already less than half its 1950 population; 40 squares miles in the city were already without meaning, and something between 3000 and 5000 buildings set empty. Urban decay was the word used to describe the situation, in the 2008 report.

Describing the fast change from a sprawled city growth to a spotted city fast decline, the 2008 report introduced clearly the race matter and the struggle between white and blacks communities. By the 1950's, the movement of more affluent families to the suburbs had already begun, but the riots of 1967 turned that movement into full-fledged "white flight", changing the destiny of the central parts of the city and the history of the inner part of the city. From 1950 to 2000 Detroit population plummeted, as factory after factory closed, and its economic condition steadily worsened; and as white-collar employment moved to the suburbs along with large parts of the city's middle class, the population who remained in the city center and in the inner city, before the sprawled areas of the white suburbs, was poorer, and more highly dependent on public services. But the city, without enough affluent people paying taxes, could no longer afford to provide just those services. So, from the early stages of recent history to 2008, the fast changes of Detroit urban geography can hardly be separated from race's struggles and race's geography. In 2008, over 80% of Detroit's population was African American, with approximately 666,000 residents, plus a large part of population belonging to the Latino southwestern triangle. More or less, the same geography of 1970, showing that while white American population had the opportunity to leave the crisis and the declining city, the poorest part of population couldn't, and it became the largest part of its residents.

The 2008 AIA report turned to be very optimistic about the way Detroit could save its future and change its decline into a challenge, and it is from these years' perspective that Detroit has been seen as a "shrinking city". The report focused on the challenges of the city, many of them, after 4 more years today, still persisting, but considered at that time as central elements of a renewal strategy: the architectural heritage, history, legacy and physical assets, with a well recognizable CDB with a value in architectural, artistic and historic legacy is still to be

reclaimed to a contemporary beauty and prosperity; the power and cultural diversity of neighborhoods is still a problem, today, rather than being that opportunity able to glue together parts so different in the same urban environment; even the matter of the size of the city, that for the first time appeared during those years, is still a problem rather than being an opportunity to re-imagine the urban condition, and the city has been very close to bankruptcy, due to the relations between general, administrative size, number of taxes collected in that cluster and costs for maintaining everything the original size required.

The recent history and the last 5 years have in fact shown the deep relation between loss of population, economic crisis, tax collection reduction and territorial assets' troubles. When residents have left the city, in many cases they left the buildings where they used to live; without any customer and any dweller aiming at buying them, the buildings remained abandoned; the first self help for people already left, trying to balance the cost of owning an apartment or a building and not being able to sell it and to gain a rent from it, has been to stop paying taxes to the city. This way, the municipality of Detroit began to collect properties instead of taxes, finding itself as owner of more than 67,000 units, left abandoned, without taxes paid for years, and expropriated to relief the loss of tax gains. This policy, more or less natural for a municipality, brought to the situation we see today, with the municipal budget below zero and a huge concentration of derelict building without any possibility to produce any profit. In this respect the city council has acted in deep isolation from both the state and the county, behaving as a singular and individual actor on the institutional and political scene. In this sense the focus on the traditional urban renewal tools and objects, on the one side, on the other the isolation from the larger urban region and the institutional framework, as a result also of the contraposition between the black city and the white-state provoked a collapse larger than ever expected.

2.3 The future: downsizing Detroit or reshaping Detroit

From 2008, the real challenge began to be evident. With a very pragmatic way of doing, from many voices the main suggestion was the reduction of the size of the physical area of the city. Even in the 2008 AIA report, and in many studies that followed, the reduction of the size was considered the best receipt not only to solve the problems of a urban dimension that didn't represent anymore the real demographic and social geography of the city, but also the way to copy with a more sustainable way of thinking and planning the city.

The emphasis on the size came to be evident. And the main question started to change: Detroit began to be a smaller city and the question was whether a smaller city, and a smaller Detroit, could become a stronger, healthier and more sustainable city. From many points of view, even without investing in the way such a change could have been reached, local policies, expert studies started

considering enthusiastically Detroit as a test to show that the shrink of a city was an opportunity to reclaim urban lands to agricultural uses and to reduce the need of public money to make a urban environment work.

Under this cultural umbrella, the new mayor David Bing called an already awarded US planner, Toni Griffin, professor of urban planning at Harvard University. The aim of the mayor was great: considering what he found when he became mayor, a city declining, a continuous reduction of taxes, jobs and population, David Bing decided to invest in a new general urban project, but with a different aspect. Without considering the opportunity to start a new, comprehensive structural plan for the re-birth of the city, the project called for a 12/18 months perspective called "Detroit Works Project", aimed at producing "an effort to map the city's future" following what Prof. Griffin said in one of the first interviews after she has been called to Detroit. "This leadership saw now as the opportunity to create a shared vision for the city, across sectors, and inclusive of broad civic engagement. I was asked to join the mayor's team to assemble and manage a team to create the vision with members of his staff".

The first idea, calling Professor Griffin, was ambitious: even if the possibility to generate a comprehensive plan has always been seen as very hard, in the first stages there was a general curiosity and expectation toward the production of a long term strategy which could save the city. After several months, however, with the worsening of the economical crisis, the idea of such a plan, based on certain datasets, and able to find a solution to the variety of troubles the city was living, was abandoned, even after many critics.

It is important to say that many of the critics, and one of the reasons for which the plan didn't work, were underlining an evident disconnection between the idea of the plan and the size of the maps it was considering, and the real city that was changing within the plan and within the city limits. Local associations and local organizations in December 2010 contested very hardly the idea of plan the mayor was working at, and they showed the deepness of this disconnection, above all showing how more important were experiences gained on the ground, day by day, by the spontaneous effort of local associations rather then data, technical points of view, academic solutions. Reading the reports of the public meetings held during 2010 a growing concern about the effort of the mayor is evident, and a general disaffection over its aims. During these public meetings, the disconnection between plan, tools and the real situation of the city gave the possibility to contest also the democracy of the process, with a mayor representing even less population day after day, considered in charge of planning a city that was no longer existing.

This criticism paved the way to a period of confusion, and to a systematic announcement of a new plan, full of solutions and above all able to plan the downsizing of the city, the concentration of the population still living in the city in few neighborhoods and the general, planned shrinking of the city. The question then shortly became evident: no plan would be enough well planned to plan for a city whose destiny was to disappear; if the choice was the reduction of the city

and the reduction of the urban area, the idea of a urban plan was in strong, evident opposition, so strong that for many months the option "no plan" became to be one of the most realistic, as well as feared.

Mayor Bing began to face a totally new, but at the end evident situation: Detroit as a traditional city was no more existing. Population was declining, jobs were flying away, economy was not recovering even if US were experiencing a general change over the previous economic crisis, the size of the cancer that was emptying many neighborhoods was even growing and the number of houses and buildings abandoned was so high that entire neighborhoods were now empty and without anything that could assure them to be part of a urban environment. The fiscal crisis of the municipality brought the city to a collapse on April 2012: no more money to spend, no more urban facilities able to operate, no more services assured for population.

But beside these facts, a different geography was still enough strong to be evident, in this derelict atmosphere: local communities, small efforts to change the destiny to some few, small, groups of blocks, the city Hospital and the Wayne University city campus able to supportt very limited but evident processes of urban renewal on the one side, plus some spontaneous phenomena of people getting back to the city on the other, were the facts that pushed mayor Bing to change his perspective and start a different process of planning, more tailored to this new urban geography.

As a result of this, the idea of a plan was changed into the idea of a process of planning, helping the city in developing a mid-term strategy by July 2012. While in the previous period dedicated to the elaboration of a plan at the same time the municipality had started the demolition of 10.000 houses in the city suburbs, starting a process of physical shrinking of the urban areas, the new season is characterized by a new process of public dialogue and outreach. Enhancing and supporting even more the public debate, the municipality started investing into a two levels strategy: from one side trying to keep alive a city commission for the new plan, even if without assuring money enough to make it run, in order to produce at the end a vision for the future, in the form of a new plan, on the other side concentrating some special projects over three different neighborhoods of the city, developed with the help of the citizens, listening and learning from the lesson cities such as Cleveland were showing to US cities trying to fight urban decline4.

[4] Cleveland started some processes of urban renewal investing in the neighborhoods and trying to find new energy from the revitalization of their economic and social environments. The Cleveland Neighborhoods Development Coalition (http://www.cndc2.org/) was created in 1982 and still working to focus urban planning attention on urban neighborhoods. From this experience and others, the city published the new 2020 perspective plan, Connecting Cleveland, aimed at creating a stronger link between communities.

Also at the federal level, within Obama administration, with the Strong Cities[5] program, many things were learned from the Detroit case: if the city itself change its physical, human, economic and cultural reason and size, urban policies should change and they should come back in the agenda of all levels, from municipal to federal. A group of target cities has been selected by the federal level, even if it was not clear how the help of the federal level could work together the local municipal policies and in coordination with the state level policies; this aspect has been particularly evident in Detroit where the opposition between municipal and state level policies was very strong, from all the points of view. In this situation, the strategy of the city changed completely: a two level approach is now evident, with a first, locally based approach to urban policies, focused on three sectors of the city and a second, long term strategy, rather then plan, able to work even sighing but following the time and the pace of the city. Downsizing Detroit had its first evident result: the re-sizing of the approach to the way the city should be thought and planned.

From this new approach, a new awareness emerged, maybe in a really pragmatic way of approaching the urban phenomenon. The crisis of the urban environment is still very strong, and it is affecting also the small cities around Detroit (The title "Hyatt is leaving Dearborne"[6] shows how the crisis is affecting also the industrial, established Ford's city headquarter). The idea of shrinking the city became to be really the only one available, and once again the American Institute of Architects developed a strategy to organize the city investing in its urban core and in few, established urban villages around it, leaving the space in between empty, with greenbelts and banked lands. And in many ways, the shrinking of the city and the new geography of a multi polar local organization gave the possibility to think to a new land use for the vacant lands: agriculture.

As a result the size of the city seems to change once again. From the urban prairie as it has been described[7] to a real prairie, where agriculture becomes one of the land uses in the new land use plan; Detroit soils seem to have all the characteristics to help this process: there is open land, fertile soil, ample water, willing labor, and a desperate demand for decent food. And there is plenty of community will behind the idea of turning the capital of American industry into ad agrarian paradise, with many communities aspiring to change Detroit into the first one hundred percent food self-sufficient city of the world. And today, Detroit is already producing more food inside its borders than any other traditional American city: about five hundred small plots have been converted and created by

[5] Strong Cities is a pilot initiative, sponsored by Obama administration, to strengthen local capacity and spark economic growth in local communities while ensuring taxpayer dollars are used wisely and efficiently. To accomplish this, federal agencies are providing experienced staff to work directly with six cities: Chester, PA; Cleveland, OH; Detroit, MI; Fresno, CA; Memphis, TN; and New Orleans, LA. These teams are working with local governments, the private sector, and other institutions to leverage federal dollars and support the work being done at the local level to encourage economic growth and community development.

[6] http://www.detroityes.com/mb/showthread.php?13532

[7] http://www.detroitblog.org/?p=287

an international organization called Urban Farming, founded by the songwriter Taja Sevelle. Realizing that Detroit was the most agricultural promising of the fourteen cities in the five countries where Urban Farming now exists, Sevelle moved herself and her organization's headquarters there in the last years. The goal is to triple the amount of land under cultivation in Detroit each year.

The different size of the city created room also for other locally based phenomena, able to change step by step and little by little the geography of the city. Raising while the incapacity of the official efforts was evident, a movement of people buying houses at ridiculous prices began to be evident. Toby Barlow 8 wrote in a New York Times article about people buying up $100 houses, moving to Detroit and doing all sorts of interesting things with them. Artists and architects, painters and inventors are buying some derelict plots and houses investing few money and trying to transform them in a local workshop of new ideas. Local, very small things such as "Heidelberg Project"9 or "Ancient Evenings Project" began to happen in the interstices of the declining city, filling them with new, little forms of urban life. Many other cities, such as Buffalo, NY and Cleveland, OH or Cincinnati, OH have invested just on these small, local efforts to invent something new so strongly that nowadays those cities are seen as the new "Rust Belt Chic".

3. Conclusions

Alongside a series of significant contributions in the field of economic studies (see especially Glaeser, but also Landry and Florida, Trigilia, Kurz) that quantify the current financial crisis and explore its economic reasons and relationship with the 'city', in order to come to a general conclusion of this paper, a series of reflections coming directly from the world of urban studies shall be taken into consideration, which focus on the challenges that the crisis is proposing to planning.

Particularly useful in this sense is to consider the section edited by Soureli and Youn of Critical Planning and dedicated in 2009 to discuss "urban restructuring" processes in progress as the result of processes induced by the crisis, but also as the actions of individual agents and collective response to the crisis, among which, we could say also the responses of planning.

That multi-voiced debate between Neil Brenner, John Friedmann, Margit Mayer, J. Allen Scott and Edward Soja, in fact presented already a general reflection on the crisis of the city and its urban implications and challenges in the field of planning, policy and action. It was argued that the crisis has introduced elements of turbulence in society and in cities and urban regions, which require not only a

[8] http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/06/us/06detroit.html?pagewanted=all
[9] http://www.heidelberg.org/

greater ability to analyze precisely the effects on the city, but to address some theoretical questions that have to do with the conceptualization of the city and related approaches to planning.

According to Brenner in fact, first, the current crisis shakes the city processes of urban restructuring and questions the "city-ness of cities", i.e. what has made the city such a thing; secondly the city, involved in the crisis, appears, even more than we have hitherto refused to acknowledge, grappling with problems of trans-scale governance, crossing global and local (Friedman) and spatial and social effects of particular relevance in forms different from those to which we are accustomed to name and map (Mayer). Nevertheless, thirdly, cities, as nodes of cognitive-cultural economy, are again at the centre of important tensions: in fact the materials that have fuelled the contemporary city can reveal to be highly fragile in terms of crisis response (Scott). As a result, fourthly, the condition of transition to a different economic and social model carries with it a transition to new urban models, such as what Soja defines a metropolitan post-transition, where cities have become spaces of high volatility and mutability, rather than elements of permanence and stability.

On this base, as the Detroit's case seems to show, it is necessary to change deeply the conceptual frameworks that have so far been used to study the processes of urban restructuring generated by the crisis. The challenges in the field of planning, appear equally relevant. In fact, the crisis not only calls into question a revision of the mechanisms of urban development linked to a neo-liberal season (Brenner) but also pushes to sight the possibility of producing a vision antagonistic to the forms of regulation and planning that we have developed in this perspective. At the same time, according to Friedman, there is the need for a new "progressive view" of planning, one linked to the necessity to accept the idea of a finite world adopting a perspective of sustainability for the city, to avoid a process of commodification of everyday life adopting the reference to a friendly city, capable of nourishing the spirit and restore a sense of civic obligation, and where there is an economic accounting system capable of taking in count both system use values and exchange values. In spatial terms, finally, Soja, proposes also to work on new urban models (community-based regionalism) and multi-scalar coalitions that shall take more seriously into account new emerging urban issues, responding to a renewed request of "right to the city".

The case of Detroit, presents traces of these challenges and provides materials to be studied in order to reflect upon them. The changing size and form of the city is in fact deeply affecting on the one side the city-ness of this city; at the same time it is challenging the role that planning can play in similar conditions, showing its limits, but also the symbolic power it is still asked to play.

5. References

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