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Polycentrism and commercial “central” places in Rome: State of art and scenarios of urban qualification

Abstract¹:

Urban Planning in Rome today tends towards a polycentric structure of the suburbs and of the metropolitan area. For this reason, a system of important “Central Districts” is under construction, and some of them also contain large commercial super-structures.

The paper intends to analyze the positive and negative aspects of the relationship between urban polycentrism and commercial super-structures in the city of Rome, starting from the description of the historical relationship between the morphogenetic potentiality of the commercial function and the structure of urban space, and observing the events and characteristics of three largest and most important new Central Districts (Bufalotta, EUR Sud, Ponte di Nona).

Starting from this analysis, some topics and criteria for the planning and the urban qualification of this type of urban districts are briefly presented.

Keywords: Morphogenetic functions, Polycentrism, Central District, Master Plan, Urban space.

¹ This study is the result of a research work of the two authors. Antonio Cappuccitti wrote the first paragraph; Alexandra Afrasinei wrote the second paragraph; Antonio Cappuccitti and Alexandra Afrasinei wrote together the final synthesis (third paragraph).

1. Commercial urban functions and planning of the “polycentric city” in Rome today

The history of the city of Rome, both the ancient and contemporary, shows that the commercial function has always possessed a strong morphogenetic potentiality on the physical form of the city (Cappuccitti, Piroddi, 2004). That is, the places characterized by concentrations of commercial activities, in their various forms, have always exerted a particular effect of central reference and urban attraction, which, in the long period of time, was therefore also crucial for the development of the physical and social conformation of the city (Cappuccitti, 2006).

In Rome, places for commerce in history are characterized by a high level of permanence and stratification, meaning that many of the important "historic" places for commercial activities are still successfully used for this purpose nowadays, and recognized by citizens as places with unique identity, figurability and urban value. Consider, for example, the central streets Via del Corso, Via Nazionale, Via Cola Di Rienzo, or the important traditional periodical markets such as those of Campo de' Fiori (Picture 1), Trastevere, Piazza Navona.

Today, therefore, the "historical" commercial places co-exist with the same contemporary places and with the commercial super-structures.

In many of the most recent developed urban areas, particularly in the suburbs, the "new" commercial places are characterized by very different typologies and forms, from the traditional periodical outdoor markets, to the concentrations of shops along the main commercial streets (often defined as "natural shopping centers"), to the commercial building of different size and extension (from the "supermarkets", to those that we properly call "shopping centers", to the big super-structures). We will limit the discussion to the commercial super-structures, showing the relationships between the locations of these buildings and urban planning policies.

The largest roman shopping centers were positioned in the urban area according to two different types of logic: some on the basis of the decisions of the general Master Plans, others, rather numerous, on the basis of variations and contradictions to the same Master Plan, due to the demands of accessibility and economy.

The result of the complex overlap of these two different logics has led to a particular general position of these large structures in the territory of the Roman suburbs. Some authors, using a metaphorical image, spoke about "asteroids" fallen on Roman territory, extraneous compared to the urban context, in a seemingly random way, solely on the basis of the particular needs of maximum accessibility and visibility, more than on the basis of rational urban planning logics (Scarso, 2006).

We will limit the observations to the phenomena that have occurred in the Roman area in the last fifteen years, with reference to the criteria of the two General Master Plans that were active during this period (became active, respectively, in the Sixties and in 2008).

To describe briefly the current state of the art concerning the commercial superstructures in Rome, we focus on four particular points.

1. *Placement in the urban structure*

Many shopping centers, including some of the largest and most important ones, are located in positions that are completely inconsistent with the directives of the Master Plan of 1962, which in fact has been repeatedly contradicted by different local variations, before the definition of the Master Plan of 2008.

Many of these structures have been localized, of course, in positions of maximum vehicular accessibility and visibility, along the major roads and highways of the metropolitan area. The network of the city's major roads has a typical "radial" shape, that is formed by the roads that converge from different directions to the historic City Center; this network meets a large motorway ring road (the so-called GRA, Grande Raccordo Anulare), on which five major highways converge (respectively from North, South, East, West). The areas that are most influenced by the development of large shopping centers are today especially located in the intersections between "radial" highways (in particular the motorways A1 to Milan, A2 to Naples and the south of the country, A24 to L'Aquila – Pescara) and the GRA motorway ring.

2. *"Spontaneous concentrations" of malls, as "specialized citadels" in the urban landscape*

In the absence, for several years, of a comprehensive and consistent public program for large commercial structures, some special "spontaneous concentrations" of activities and shopping centers were born in some parts of the municipal area (the largest and most numerous in the intersection between the highways GRA and A2 Rome-Naples), that are not supported by unitary local Master Plans. These concentrations of commercial buildings have given form to a composite and inconsistent suburban landscape, where the public space between the commercial buildings, used primarily for vehicular traffic and parking, is mostly unsatisfactory for a pedestrian perception.

In some cases, the concentrations of several commercial buildings in the territory, around a main shopping center, led to a complementarity between the various local urban functions, giving form to "specialized citadels" (Scarso, 2007).

In several of those "citadels", born without a unitary logic of planning, the architectural quality of the commercial buildings and the quality of the public spaces

were generally neglected; in newer ones, object of unitary local planning, there was instead an architectural research of design quality, in different ways as we will describe later.

3. Malls and existing residential quarters

In several cases, the shopping centers were built in urban areas where there were existing residential quarters, sometimes resulting a difficult and problematic relationship with these neighbouring districts (traffic congestion, lack of integration of different urban functions and of collective spaces).

4. Malls, Central Districts, financial resources

In some important recent cases, commercial areas and buildings are designed as essential components of new central settlements (the new "Central Districts"), to become important poles of reference and urban identity for large parts of urban periphery; we will discuss this type of districts, that are particularly important in the most recent planning policies in Rome.

In these cases, the districts were planned by means of unitary local Master Plans, and in most cases by means of procedures of public - private partnership, aiming to encourage the involvement of private financial capitals for the construction of public equipments, in exchange for special incentives for the private partners. So the malls are important parts of the Central Districts, and they determine the private financial resources to build public spaces and facilities.

After this concise description of the existing situation, we proceed to discuss the particularly important case of large commercial buildings and spaces inside the new "Central Districts" in Rome; the main commercial super-facilities of the Capital are located in these urban settlements. For this purpose it is necessary to outline some of the directives of the two General Master Plans (1962 and 2008) that have characterized urban policies in Rome since Sixties, regarding the central settlements.

The Master Plan of 1962, which has been operative for 45 years, was a functionalist plan, according to the dominant criteria of the time, and this led to a substantial monofunctionality of new developments (in particular of new residential districts and of the equipments for public and private services), and a mainly car based transport network (Cecchini, 2009). As for the central settlements of urban and metropolitan rank, given the historically monocentric structure of the city, the Plan provided an urban structure based on three main "centers": the historic City Center, the directional district of EUR (whose construction was begun during the fascist period), and the system of central settlements of the so-called "Eastern Directional System" (SDO - Sistema Direzionale Orientale), in which the apparatus of government and

administrative buildings had to be concentrated (this system of districts was never built).

The "new" Master Plan of 2008, of course, becomes law in a time and in a cultural moment entirely different from the previous plan of 1962. Instead of just three "centers", the new plan provides a variety of new "Central Districts" (the "Polycentrism"), characterized by different hierarchical ranks, intended to be a complex and extensive urban regeneration of the suburbs, as in the case of many other major European cities; instead of the monofunctionality, for the new central districts the new Plan provides a complex *mix* of different and complementary urban functions, able to ensure liveliness and urban quality; instead of a car based transport system, the new plan provides a complete and strong growth of public transport by rail (Cecchini, 2009).

The new "Central Districts" are structured and organized on the basis of the hierarchical rank (metropolitan, urban, local level), with different extensions, different urban relevances, different settled functions. Obviously, the most important and extensive Central Districts are those of urban and metropolitan rank (eighteen districts) (Picture 3), designed to contain a mix of different and complementary functions (residence, equipment for public and private services of metropolitan and urban rank, buildings for commercial activities, leisure facilities etc.). These Central Districts are also intended to have a strong "magnet" and reference effect for large peripheral areas, with the aim of fostering a widespread urban redevelopment action. For the unitary and organic planning of these districts, special tools and procedures are planned (especially the "urban project" as defined in the Master Plan of 2008) that tends to morphological, environmental, functional and economic qualities.

The Central Districts of local rank are intended to be a reference and landmark for urban areas that are less extensive; so they contain functions and public spaces that have a smaller urban "basin".

The major Central Districts (urban and metropolitan rank) are those in which the largest amounts of commercial space are programmed, and are therefore those in which are localized commercial super-structures.

It is important to note that some of these Central Districts were designed during the long planning period before Master Plan of 2008 become active; in addition, the commercial functions have played a crucial role in the process of public - private partnerships that have been used for finding the necessary financial resources. The fundamental question is whether the commercial functions have been adequately provided and planned in all these Central Districts, in town planning projects, to

achieve a high quality of urban settlements in this Centrality, and how to work to improve the relationship between commercial functions and these types of districts.



FIG.1. The traditional daily market in Piazza Campo de' Fiori [Photo: Antonio Cappuccitti]



FIG. 2. Shopping in the evening in the historic City Center [Photo: Antonio Cappuccitti]

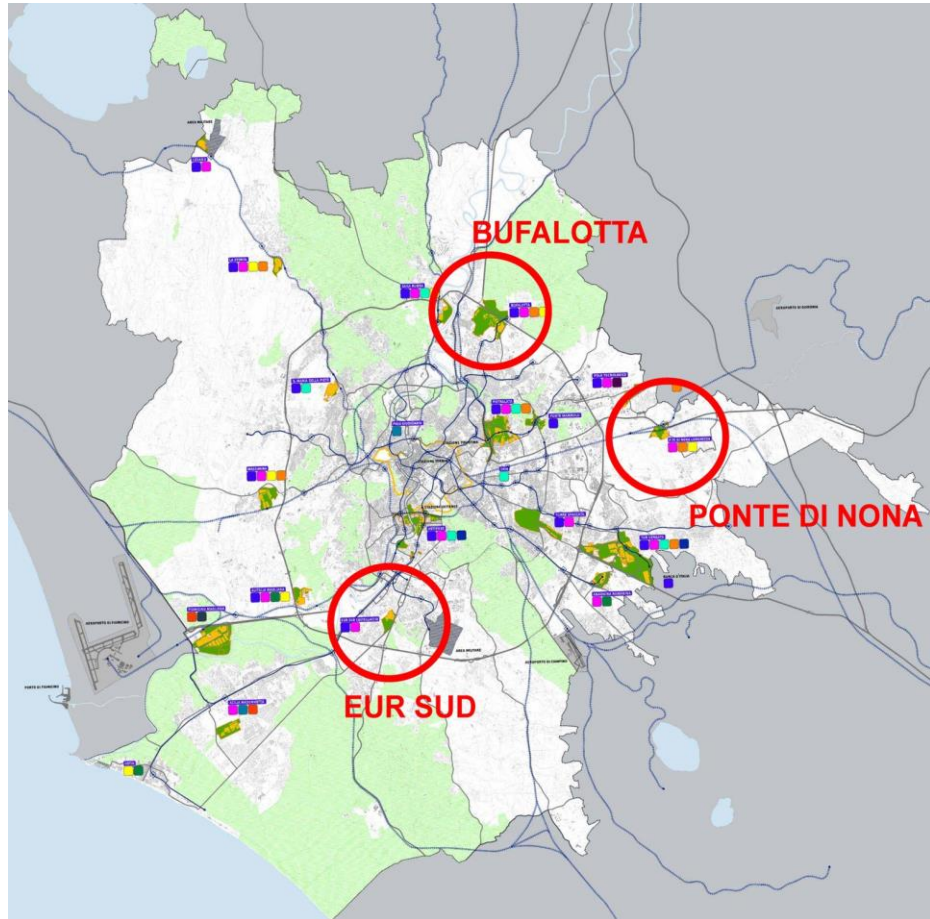


FIG. 3. "Metropolitan and Urban Central Districts". The three new districts of Bufalotta, EUR Sud, Ponte di Nona. (Master Plan 2003-2008. Municipality of Rome)

2. Three particularly significant cases of Central Districts with commercial super-structures

The three most important and largest commercial super-structures of the city of Rome are located within three metropolitan Central Districts whose construction began in the last fifteen years and part of the projects have not yet been completed.

These three cases are very important not only for the super-structure itself, but also with regard to the three central settlements in which they are located, which are actually the three largest new Central Districts in the metropolitan area, and in the same time for the relations between these settlements and the whole city and its territory.

The three mentioned Central Districts are located in different sectors of the city:

1. "Bufalotta", in the North sector, near the intersection of the A1 Rome – Milan motorway with the GRA; this district contains the commercial super-structure "Porta di Roma Nord" (Northern Gate of Rome) (Fig 4 and 5);
2. "Eur Sud – Castellaccio", in the South sector, near the EUR directional district; in this district is located the commercial super-structure "Euroma2" (Fig 6 and 7).
3. "Ponte di Nona – Lunghezza", in the East sector, located along the A24 Rome – L'Aquila motorway; in this district is located the commercial super-structure "Roma Est" (Fig 8);

These three Central Districts are meant to play an important role in the construction of urban polycentrism. In fact, they are the most large settlements between the new districts under construction, and they are located in a position of centre of gravity between extended and pre-existing urban areas, containing a *mix* of important urban functions aimed to build three very considerable urban references in the metropolitan area.

Some important features are common to all three commercial super-structures in the three Central Districts:

- The large size of the structures (they are among the largest ones in Europe);
- The location as "urban gate" towards the consolidated city, along major transport routes;
- The direct access and visibility from major highway intersections;
- The presence of different types of activities for retail, business and leisure, aimed to a diverse offering of entertainment;
- The insertion of the project in the overall master plan, becoming subordinate of the entire urban structure;
- The research for a singular architectural form for a perceptual and functional "landmark", suitable to be a reference for the identification of urban and architectural character of the respective urban tissue;
- The presence, as in many other similar cases, of internal spaces that evidently allude to a "pseudo-urban" structure of pedestrian walkways and covered squares;
- The research for the integration between "closed" system of internal space and "open" external space.

An evident character of urban design and integration with the rest of the city joins in particular, however, the overall morphological urban design of the three Central Districts, beyond the many differences between the three urban projects. The settlements are structured as autonomous and closed urban parts, morphologically distinct from the urban context and the surrounding area, interpreting, in this way, a historical feature of the city of Rome already highlighted in the Master Plan of 2008: to be a city made up of many "cities within a city".

We briefly describe, now, some essential characters and details of each of the three cases.

1. Euroma 2² is a commercial super-structure of more than 50,000 square meters. The commercial structure is an effective part of an overall master plan of the extension of 63 hectares, which plays its own role of central point of reference for "Europarco Business Park" of South Eur - Castellaccio, which will be the first big business park in the Capital. The settlement includes offices for a total of 172,000 square meters, the mall and, as the main buildings that characterize the morphology of the project, two skyscrapers 30 floors high (a directional skyscraper and the residential skyscraper "Eurosky Tower").

The local master plan includes a system of open public spaces whose center is formed by a large pedestrian square which becomes the connecting tissue between the buildings, providing at the same time a crucial area for meeting and socializing. The main buildings of the complex gravitate on this central space. The shopping complex was designed by Franco Purini and Studio Transit, who also designed, separately, the two skyscrapers.

The coordination of architecture, guaranteed from the unity of the master plan, has led to a closer integration between the shape of the commercial super-structure and the overall design of the settlement. The *mix* of urban uses, therefore, includes a strong rate of directional and commercial functions, and residential functions.

The surrounding urban context is characterized by a composite and articulated system of urban areas: the important directional district of the EUR, several buildings for offices, various and extensive residential neighbourhoods.

Currently (May 2013) in the Central District have been built: the commercial super-structure (fully working), the two skyscrapers, several office buildings, and the driveways, meanwhile the public plaza is under construction.

² References of the reported data: "Europarco Business Park - Work Live Play", illustrative brochure of Parsitalia Real Estate; WEB Site www.euroma2.it.

2. The Central District of "Bufalotta", in the northern part of the city, also features an autonomous conformation of the settlement, clearly visible from the intersection between the highway A1 Rome - Florence - Milan and the GRA ring road. In this case, there is a high percentage of residential buildings, and the urban landscape is therefore characterized by two separate and complementary parts: the commercial super-structure and the adjacent residential part. The local Master Plan was developed by Valle Associates Architects - G. Valle.

The residential area has an "open fabric" form, with three residential sub-districts, and gravitates on a large central avenue, on which the buildings for public services will be located (including a church and a theater). An urban park of 150 hectares will be located as a center of gravity between the new Central District and the existing neighboring districts.

The super-structure ("Porta di Roma") is an authentic "specialized citadel" that consists of large buildings for different and complementary activities separated from the rest of the urban landscape.

The super-structure is therefore made up of a coordinated system of autonomous buildings, but they overlook two large open spaces that make up the center and the mutual bond of the citadel. A high vacuum trapezoidal volume, located on the main mall building, is the "landmark" that makes the "core" of the Central District visible from the highway.

Currently (May 2013) in the Central District there are already built: the commercial super-structure (fully working), with the hotel and other buildings for offices, the roads and most of the residential buildings of the district.

In addition to the commercial and service buildings and equipments of "Porta di Roma", the local Master Plan of the district also provides buildings for public and private services for the neighbourhood and the vast urban park that has not been yet completed; this actually involves a perception of incompleteness and of monofunctionality of the urban parts outside the mall.

3. The "Ponte di Nona - Lunghezza" metropolitan Central District is the most peripheral of the three districts that we are discussing; the settlement is also in close proximity to several other low-density residential settlements, particularly lacking of central qualities.

Even in this case, as in the Bufalotta district, the settlement has two morphologically characterized and autonomous parts (the super-structure on the one hand, the residential settlement on the other), also divided by the particular shape of the site and the presence of a dense traffic road. Actually, there is not a morphological and

pedestrian integration between those two urban components, apart from a pedestrian bridge that cannot be defined as a continuity generator.

The mall has, as in the other two cases, a mix of commercial functions and entertainment activities, for 136.000 square meters of total area. A thematic park will be adjacent to the mall, allowing the outdoor extension of its inner spaces for collective uses.

In different ways, and with different levels of success, the three mentioned cases show the importance of a morphological and spatial integration between the super-commercial structures and the surrounding urban texture, especially in this particular cases in which is intended to play a centrality role with functional *mixité*.

This objective of a functional and morphological integration between different and complementary components of the city finds a serious obstacle in this citadel typology derived from this isolated *fortress* status.



FIG. 4, FIG. 5. "Porta di Roma", Bufalotta Central District (Valle Associates Architects – G. Valle). Open pedestrian squares in the Mall [Photos: Antonio Cappuccitti and Alexandra Afrasinei]



FIG. 6. "Euroma 2", Eur Sud – Castellaccio Central District. The Mall, and the central square under construction [Photo: Antonio Cappuccitti and Alexandra Afrasinei]



FIG. 7. Eur Sud – Castellaccio Central District. The two towers under construction (Franco Purini Architect and Studio Transit) [Photo: Antonio Cappuccitti and Alexandra Afrasinei]



FIG. 8. "Roma Est", Ponte di Nona Central District. The Mall: view from the residential quarter [Photo: Antonio Cappuccitti and Alexandra Afrasinei]

3. Malls and polycentrism. Design criteria and performance rules and regulations for urban planning and qualification

The three cases of Central Districts that we discussed briefly, and the three large commercial super-structures, were designed by unitary local development plans. These plans are based on procedures of public - private partnership, aimed to activate private financial resources for the implementation of services of public interest. In the

public - private exchange connected to these plans, the private financial resources provided by the commercial structures were decisive.

A positive quality of these districts was just determined by the use of unitary Master Plans, which led to a unitary town planning and to a direct coordination of the architectures and public spaces.

The fundamental problem, which we treat here, is in the mutual relations between the super-structures, central settlements in which these structures are contained, and the entire city.

Analysing the positive qualities but also the problems of these districts, and extending the analysis to several other important cases of the Roman area, we can ask whether the rules and regulations of the general urban planning, that the urban projects have to observe, have been effective or insufficient. We can ask, also, if it is not appropriate to improve these systems of rules and standards, both for the construction of future Central Districts equipped with concentrations of commercial functions, both for an urban qualification of existing settlements of this type.

Obviously, the subject of systems of rules and regulations for a satisfactory local planning is extremely complex, and would require an articulated series of clarifications and distinctions that we can not discuss here, with particular reference to the metropolitan Central Districts planned under the public - private partnership (Cappuccitti, 2012). But an important key of the discussion could be to find a set of performance criteria, to be considered as fundamental and "indispensable" for the contextualization of this typology of commercial activities inside the centralities, and then develop these systems of rules (and coordination procedures) in more articulated and detailed ways.

It is very important, moreover, that such systems of rules and regulations are consistent with the particular characterization, and with the unique history and culture, of a city of high thickness and historic stratification like Rome. The question is, in substance: to try to give urbanity and respect *genius loci*, beyond the homologations and banalizations created by globalization in this case of commercial super-structures.

With this objective, we can define the following brief series of basic topics. They are deduced from problems and qualities of many urban parts and districts of this kind, and from many urban projects in which these problems have been considered in different ways. These issues are part of an itinerary of research in which the authors of this paper are engaged.

1. *Functional integration between business functions and settlements*

The main problem of the relationship between commercial structures and settlements is, in many cases, the functional separation between urban parts (on one side the *mall*, on the other residential settlement).

It 's obviously necessary that the Master Plans of the local settlements are well designed in the sense of this integration, to distribute everywhere services and equipments for functions that confer "city effect" and to get a good balance between services available inside the mall and services available in the surrounding settlement. But it is also desirable that the services and functions present in the same super-structures are differentiated by type and rank (metropolitan, urban, local and neighbourhood), so that the super-structure can become attractive for both the daily needs of those who live close, and for the periodic visits of those who live far away in the city.

2. *Morphological integration between commercial buildings and settlements*

The morphological integration between super-structures and settlements requires, by necessity, the presence of a unified urban plan for the Central District, in which the morphological role of commercial buildings is properly integrated into the overall structure of the settlement. Unity of the urban planning and coordination of the architectural projects are conditions of primary importance for this goal.

The necessary presence of the access roads and parking areas in many cases determines a project in which the super-structure is highlighted and marked by a strong infrastructural border, strengthening the effect of singularity and urban landmark of the commercial buildings; this makes necessary a clear definition of physical connections with the context.

3. *Correlations between the system of internal paths and "green networks" of the settlements*

The effect of separation between commercial structures, generally large and massive, and the surrounding context, can be solved with different design features, among which is crucial the search for a maximum connection and continuity of pedestrian and cycle paths, as well as the driveways.

4. *Correlations between central settlements, commercial places, city, and metropolitan area*

Some commercial places are often accessible only by car, and this is represented by the typical image of the enormous parking areas that surround many super-commercial structures. On the contrary, it is very important, given the diversity of uses that these places are reachable by public transport, and also connected with cycling networks of urban rank. It is also appropriate that, in the case of large commercial facilities of metropolitan or urban rank, there is an effective separation of

traffic flows, to avoid the congestion of all the neighbouring settlement during periods of maximum flow.

5. *Presence of coordinated systems of collective spaces, inside and outside*

The new commercial places usually have internal systems of spaces that evidently allude to the collective space of the traditional city: [covered and air-conditioned] streets and squares that implement the commercial paths, which are open to the public during limited hours of the day. In a cultural context dominated by the historical sense of the public open space, such as the Mediterranean one – and Roman in particular –, it is relevant that the internal systems of spaces are in continuity with external squares and avenues, aiming to give an authentic sense of urbanity to the commercial structures, and to realize the [physical and perceptual] connection of the commercial places with the rest of the settlement.

6. *Sense of reference and social identity of the collective places for commerce*

The new commercial super-structures are places where many citizens crowd, going there for shopping and spending time; these places are a social stage in which the majority of people feel spectator and actor at the same time. An enhancement of the sense of identity and of social reference of these places can be obtained with a mix of spaces for events and activities (representation, art, entertainment, sports, socializing and debate), in a manner complementary to other facilities for commerce and leisure, and taking care of the figurability, of the comfort, of the representative image of the area.

7. *Coordination in the progressive phases of construction*

It is very important to provide, during the various stages of construction, a gradual increase of the *mix* of uses throughout the settlement, to avoid functional segregation of the different parts; and this is the most important issue, given the current state of the new Central Districts, because in many cases the commercial buildings are realized in the first phase, leading to an incomplete project.

8. *Correlations between central settlements, commercial places, and environmental system*

One of the most qualifying and peculiar characteristics of the environmental system of the city of Rome is to have a green territorial and urban network that is extensive and widespread, and complementary to the structure of "cities within a city" that characterizes the settlement system (Fratini, 2000), and that could therefore constitute in the future a cohesive and continuous green structure (Piroddi, 2012). Then, an important element of quality of projects and planning actions will be the enhancement of the correlations between space systems of settlements and this precious green network.

A system of direct and effective rules and regulations for local planning in a regime of public - private partnership, based on design "themes" and objectives as those we have summarized above, is obviously a prerequisite for the achievement of satisfactory levels of quality of the settlements, with particular reference to the Central Districts of a big city.

But alongside the rules, the development by the municipal administrations of high capacities of management of the urban transformations is required, as evidenced by the recent experience in Italy (and particularly in the city of Rome) in the field of public - private partnership in urban planning. This correlation between rules and management is one of the central nodes of the experience and the debate in the field of urban planning in Italy, today.

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WEB Sites of the three analyzed commercial super-structures in Rome: www.galleriaportadiroma.it; www.romaest.cc; www.euroma2.it.

Images references: Antonio Cappuccitti and Alexandra Afrasinei.