

Neighbourhood renewal in Rome **Combining Strategic Choice with other design methods**

By Alessandro Giangrande and Elena Mortola

The subject of this contribution is a continuous, participatory and incremental procedure which combines three approaches cyclically connected: *Visioning*, the *Strategic Choice Approach* and *A Pattern Language*. In the view of the two authors it helps to strengthen SCA as a planning and design procedure. As members of the team that won a national design competition, the authors utilised it for developing some planning and design proposals for the renewal of Centocelle Vecchia, a suburban neighbourhood of Rome that sprang up during the twenties. As a consequence of this success, the municipality of Rome has given the team the task of forming the preliminary plan for the rehabilitation of the neighbourhood. This work is still under way.

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Our 'Ideal' Procedure

In our capacity as teachers in the field of urban design and regeneration, both of us have had opportunities to test over a long period, with our collaborators and students, the effectiveness of the Strategic Choice Approach, especially when linked to complementary design methods of *Visioning* and *A Pattern Language*. We have applied this combination to several consulting and research projects, as well as using it extensively in our teaching for first degree courses, master's courses and doctoral theses;

In a *Visioning*¹ exercise, all the interested parties – such as local authorities and other

public bodies, entrepreneurs, professional, cultural and environmental associations and neighbourhood committees – are invited to attend a workshop aimed at developing a *participatory scenario*.

A *participatory scenario* is not a picture of the future state of a place, but a tool for identifying problems and exploring possible actions to enable a community to move towards a preferable future. It differs from an *expert scenario*, where the major focus is on technological and economic forecasting.

In our version of *Visioning*, the scenario takes the appearance of a 'chronicle from the future'. The participants to the workshop interact under

the guidance of facilitators to write a short story set in the distant future, 15 or 20 years later). The participants identify with the protagonists of the story and describe what they see, say or do in order to build up a 'vision', that is a representation of a desired future.

Scenario making is the first step of a learning process that continues through the Strategic Choice Approach. In SCA the interaction takes place in a workshop involving both some *regular participants* and some *ad hoc participants*, responsible for specific areas of specialised substantive input. The learning process develops in an adaptive and exploratory fashion, guided by the four working modes of SCA: *shaping, designing, comparing and choosing*, as shown in Figure 8.

The *scenario* provides the main input to the workshop. We identify issues as *decision areas, options, uncertainty areas or comparison areas*, updating this picture – for instance, by opening a new *Visioning* session – whenever the decision situation changes.

In the *designing mode* the working group identifies some alternative proposals (*options*²) for each *decision area*. The *options* that entail transformations of the physical features of the territory can be more closely defined with the aid of *A Pattern Language*³. This is a language developed by Christopher Alexander and his associates that helps a community to design a set of consistent and effective transformations.

Each *pattern* is an 'archetype' that describes a problem that occurs over and over again in different spatial settings, pointing to possible lines of solution that can be adopted countless times without ever doing it the same way twice. Alexander described 253 *patterns* that he was able to arrange, starting with the largest, for regions and towns, then working down through neighbourhoods, clusters of building, buildings and rooms, ending finally with details of constructions. New *patterns* can be created, if

necessary, to supply solutions to any problems not considered in this language.

Like SCA, *A Pattern Language* is an interactive and incremental approach. It is possible to start a process of territorial development or change incrementally through selection and aggregation: each *pattern* interprets the *patterns* at the higher scale and is in turn interpreted by the *patterns* at the lower scale. The rules of the language can help a group to define *options* within *decision areas* as *patterns*, or clusters of *patterns*, that are compatible and synergetic.

This planning/design process is cyclic. It is not important always to start with *Visioning*: for some *decision areas, options* and sources of *uncertainty* can be identified from the existing decision situation, before developing any *scenario*. The scenario making can also be interrupted to allow the participants to use *A Pattern Language* as a diagnostic tool to understand the problems of the area and access some suggestions (*patterns*) that can help to solve them. And so on.

The procedure applied within Rome

As members of a team⁴ that won the second national competition in *Participatory and Communicative Planning*⁵, the authors applied this procedure to develop some planning and design proposals for the renewal of the neighbourhood of Centocelle Vecchia in Rome. The participation of the inhabitants was managed by way of a laboratorio (workshop) expressly set up by the municipality of Rome for the competition. Through this laboratorio, public meetings were arranged with different groups including local authorities, associations, neighbourhood committees and schoolchildren. As a result, extensive documentation was produced on the problems of the neighbourhood and the wants of the residents. The members of the team made wide use of this documentation, together with other data

gathered through special field research, to produce a (simulated) *scenario*⁶.

From this scenario the team developed 21 *decision areas*, with levels of importance and urgency and a provisional list of *options* (2 to 5 for each area). Then they built up a decision graph as an overview of the structure of the problem, and identified several *foci* with the help of the STRAD software described in Chapter 10.

Within each *focus*, the choice of a preferred decision scheme was explored using the following six *comparison areas*:

- Environmental sustainability
- Urban sustainability
- Social and cultural sustainability
- Economic and financial sustainability
- Expressed desires of the inhabitants
- Degree of innovation in solutions

The first *focus* includes four *decision areas*:

- What interventions for via Tor de' Schiavi?
- Where to design new pedestrian routes?
- What traffic improvements in neighbourhood?
- Where and how to plant new vegetation?

Starting with the preferred scheme for this focus, all *options* were found impracticable in the immediate future: so they were put in the list of deferred choices of the progress commitment package. In the *explorations now* section, the team put only the *exploratory options* that they considered appropriate for reducing critical *uncertainties*. For instance, to realise the preferred *option* for pedestrian routes, it was important to test whether the owners of the courtyards were willing to transfer to the municipality the ownership of those spaces necessary to complete the network – perhaps in exchange for certain benefits.

Similarly, the *exploratory options* for Tor de' Schiavi were needed to test opposition to the project from residents and tradesmen, including

repair garages; and also the possibility of diverting the buses presently using that route.

Meanwhile, the team proceeded to develop more detailed designs for the preferred *options* in these two *decision areas* with the aid of *A Pattern Language*. They wished to test whether the designs, if of sufficient quality, might reduce opposition to the conversion of via Tor de' Schiavi into a pedestrian street; or might induce the owners of the courtyards to grant the spaces needed to build the pedestrian routes.



Figure 1. *Options retescuole* and *pedonalizz* designed with the aid of *A Pattern Language* (artwork by F. Mecarelli)

These *options* are illustrated in Figure 1. At first the designers chose the *principal patterns*, i.e. the *patterns* that in their opinion should play a major role in implementing the projects. These *patterns* were *Promenade* (for *pedonalizz*) and *Children in the city* (for *retescuole*). Then they used the rules of the language to identify both a set of detailed *patterns*⁷ to complete the principal *patterns*, and the structure of their relationships, visualised in the form of a jigsaw puzzle⁸.

Promenade was used to "create a centre for public life: a place where you can go to see people, and to be seen" and "encourage the gradual formation of a promenade at the heart of every community, linking the main activity nodes and placed centrally, so that each point in the community is within 10 minute' walk of it". To complete the *pattern* the designers made

use of *Pedestrian street*, *Shopping street* and *Street cafe*.

The project established a strong relationship between *Children in the city* and *Network of paths and cars*.

The rehabilitation plan

The new procedure was later utilised by the team to draw up a preliminary design for the rehabilitation plan – but, this time, with the direct participation of the inhabitants of Centocelle Vecchia.

The working group was now opened up to the residents of the neighbourhood and some representatives of the local government. They

were invited to participate to an introductory session of the workshop, in which the proposals were illustrated in some detail, explaining the principles of SCA and the rules of *A Pattern Language*.

During the sessions that followed, the *decision areas* and *options* changed considerably; three new foci were identified and new *uncertainty* areas emerged through the interaction of the working group with local people.

Many people without planning and design expertise expressed their interest in *A Pattern Language*, and some of them utilised it to represent in greater detail their preferred *options*.

Concluding reflections

This experience confirms our view that, at least in the field of urban design, the cyclic procedure works better than each approach – *Visioning*, SCA and *A Pattern Language* – employed as a stand-alone procedure. This is because:

- (i) a *participatory scenario* helps to identify the aspirations of a whole community, but we need SCA to enable the incremental strategy that help us to carry it out;
- (ii) *A Pattern Language* enables the introduction of a significant field knowledge that SCA alone cannot offer. On the other hand SCA is necessary to establish the connections between the *options* that entail physical and functional transformations of the territory and the *options* of a different nature – for instance, policy choices in the field of education, social welfare or energy production that, generally, *A Pattern Language* disregards.

¹See, for instance: Ames S.C. (1993), *A Guide to Community Visioning: hands-on Information for Local Communities*, Oregon Vision Project, American Planning Association (Oregon Chapter), Oregon, Portland.

² The *options* are the natural consequence of the fact that the *Visioning* procedure usually generates different 'visions' i.e., different solutions to the same problem.

³ Alexander C., Ishikawa S., Silverstein M. (1977), *A Pattern Language. Towns - Buildings - Construction*, Oxford University Press, New York.

⁴ E. Mortola (team leader), M. Bastiani, G. Cafiero, B. Del Brocco, M. Felici, A. Fortuzzi, A. Giangrande, F. Mecarelli, F. Sartogo, A. Simone and A. Zarfati.

⁵ The competition had been advertised in 2000 by INU (National Institute of Urbanism of Italy) and WWF (World Wildlife Fund).

⁶The rules of the competition prevented the team from keeping continuing contact with the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, so the team was unable to apply the *Visioning* procedure to make a 'true' *participatory scenario*.

⁷ The full list of these *patterns* is the following: *Scattered work, Activity nodes, Shopping street, Network of paths and cars, Connected play, Street cafe, Pedestrian street, Paths and goals* (see Alexander et al, in ibidem).

⁸In this diagram the interlocking pieces represent the *patterns* that realise the two *options* (*retescuole* and *pedonalizz*): the nearer are the pieces, the stronger should be the connection between the corresponding physical spaces and functions in the project.