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The Products of Research on Spatial Planning and Urban Development.
An inquiry into the recent Italian planning literature.

Bruno Zanon
Associate Professor
Dipartimento di Ingegneria Civile, Ambientale e Meccanica – Università degli Studi di Trento
Via Mesiano, 77 - 38123 - Trento, Italy - bruno.zanon@unitn.it

Abstract

In Italy, recent University reforms, a research quality assessment exercise, and the selection of academics by means of innovative procedures are all accelerating the discussion on the specificity of research on spatial planning and urban design. One first step was a discussion on the quality of the journals in which planners and urban designers customarily publish, but there is an urgent need for a more general debate on what kind of research is expected to be developed, and what 'research products' must be delivered. This also relates to the structure itself of the discipline (such as its focus, and the specific methods used), the way academics are trained (Ph.D. programmes, in particular), how they participate in the national and international debate, as well as how they are selected, the way research is supported

financially, and finally, the connections between scholarship and practical (including professional) activities.
Following a review of the international debate on which an analytical framework has been developed, this paper analyses what is considered by Italian academia to be 'research product', on the basis of articles published in key Italian journals. The goal is not to pass judgment on each contribution, but to develop a classification of content, methods and results of what is put forward as – or should be – the product of research.

1. The Nature of Research on Planning and Urban Design: an International Debate

Harvey Perloff affirmed in 1956 that planners should be "generalists-with-a-specialty" (Perloff, 1985, p. 292). This means that in addition to a sound and general knowledge of the issues at stake, planning professionals must have the ability to develop in-depth knowledge of emerging problems and operational know-how based on up-to-date approaches and tools. For academics, this implies both developing scholarship in order to transmit knowledge and to consolidate practices, and critically analysing and innovating knowledge by means of research. A number of questions come to mind immediately: what does doing research in spatial planning, urban development and urban design mean? What does it produce? To what end? For whom? General reflections on the discipline must be accompanied by considerations of the various challenges of a practical and methodological nature faced by planners, and on how knowledge and innovation are produced and disseminated.

The distinction between scholarship (knowledge and knowledge development) and research (the formulation of hypotheses and the search for evidence) deserves attention. Scholarship is what academicians are required to do by means of a variety of activities within an environment that is oriented towards focusing issues, learning, devising novelties, and discussing. It has been claimed that "[s]cholarship demonstrates great expertise in a discipline, with clear goals and methods, documentation and internal critique, and broad significance as judged by peers" (Forsyth and

Crewe, 2006, p. 161).

These activities require particular methods and organisation which define the different cultures and styles in the various disciplines. In particular, the meaning and role of research vary, although it is acknowledged that it is only through research that innovation and cultural development can be attained. "Scholars are academics who conduct research, publish, and then perhaps convey their knowledge to students or apply what they have learned..." (Boyer, 1990, p.15). As a consequence, four kinds of scholarship are recognized, which connect theoretical engagement, synthesis, practical experiences, and teaching: the scholarships of discovery, integration, application, and teaching (Boyer, 1990, p.16). Therefore, what is done by academics regards a wide array of issues and their products are only partially based on research.

As far as planning is concerned, we must emphasise that it is mainly operational in nature, because it "operates at the interface of knowledge and action" (Campbell, 2012, p.135), and its main goal is "the development of practical outputs" (Goldstein and Carmin, 2006, p. 68) to provide benefits for the communities involved. Its strength lies in the ability to furnish a strategic framework that interacts with operational solutions (Mazza, 2002, p. 11). There is, therefore, a close connection between theory and practice, because a methodology must be provided to frame practical activities, the development of which is the only way to test the appropriateness of methods and tools. This is why the link between practice - including in the form of professional activities - and innovation has long been considered, not only in Italy, to be a fundamental way to develop new approaches and to experiment with innovative solutions. In what way can this be considered research? In some cases, it is treated as 'practice-led research' or 'practice-based research', because critical reflection accompanies action; other experiences are developed in the form of 'action-research', meaning that researchers analyse processes and outputs directly by taking part in practices, occupying a privileged position for observing and drawing general conclusions. A caveat is in order here, however, because "professional practice may be done in a scholarly way but rarely involves research in the full sense" (Forsyth and Crewe, 2006, p. 171).

For academics, the practice of teaching is fundamental; it is not only a way

to convey previously-developed knowledge, but also a stimulus to provide knowledge with a stronger structure. “Theory leads to practice. But practice also leads to theory. And teaching, at its best, shapes both research and practice” (Boyer, 1990, pp.15-16). Teaching and practical activities are therefore important, but they do not necessarily involve research, because, as has been noted, research is “a subset of scholarship” (Forsyth, 2012, p. 6).

The emerging question relates to how to assess the quality of research, however it has been developed. The growing pressure exerted by international university rankings, the assessment of the productivity of academics, the role of EU funds, and the search for visibility by departments and research centres are presenting a challenge for the everyday work of academics. The goal is an improvement in the quality of research, in anticipation of the diffusion of results and a demonstration that the discipline has ‘social utility’, but there is no single vision of the directions to be taken. In Italy, recent University reforms, a research quality assessment exercise, and the selection of academics by means of innovative procedures are all accelerating discussion on the specificity of research on spatial planning and urban design. The quality assessment process has taken a variety of ‘research products’ into consideration: not only articles in journals (differentiated on the basis of their ranking) and written contributions such as books, proceedings and translations, but also innovative products like patents and software, and even more creative contributions such as drawings, design products, performances, and exhibitions, which could be considered only when a critical publication permitted their assessment. The following aspects were analyzed: the importance of the products, their originality and level of innovation, and their internationalization and impact. A distinction emerged between the disciplines which can rely on formalized tools (that is, ‘bibliometric’ indicators such as impact factors and h index), and others - among which urban planning - whose products required a case-by-case assessment by the reviewers.

The general question “what does research on planning mean?” needs to be explained in more detail, taking into consideration the complexity of this activity. Therefore:

- what are the relationships between innovation and research?
- does research have a different meaning for the planning discipline?

- what can be considered a 'research product' in the case of planning?

Following a review of the international debate, this paper suggests an analytical framework which supports the analysis of 'research products' in the recent Italian experience. This analysis is based on articles published in key Italian journals, reflecting what is produced by Italian academia. The goal is not to pass judgement on each contribution, but to develop a classification of contents, methods and results of what is put forward as – or should be – the product of research work.

2. Research and practice

In general terms, urban planning is oriented in two main directions: the planning process (with a leaning towards analysis and decision-oriented methods), on the one hand, and the object (that is the physical space, approached by means of design methods) on the other (strategic versus substantive approaches). While for the former strand a variety of scientific methods derived from the social sciences (and increasingly from the scientific-technical sciences) are being used, in the latter case, the role of creativity makes things more complicated. "At first glance, it can seem that the activities of doing research and doing design are similar. After all, both aim to contribute something new to the world… However, the two are rather distinctive activities" (Forsyth and Crewe, 2006, p. 170). In particular, design in its narrow sense "refers to the artistic process of creating new forms and the artistic quality of those forms" (Forsyth and Crewe, 2006, p. 171).

The emergence of new issues such as environmental concerns, the effectiveness and equity of planning, and the quality of the urban space, together with the need to support public involvement and the spread of new technologies - in particular those relating to GIS, data management, and communication - has opened wide scope for research, and has stimulated innovation in approaches and practices. This has accelerated the differentiation between a scholarship that is still founded on creativity, practice and professional activity, and one based on the results of research, which makes use of "systematic methods to answer questions and add to knowledge in a way that can be replicated by others" (Forsyth and Crewe, 2006, p. 171).

The term 'practice-based research' has been introduced to provide a framework for the specificity of research in disciplines such as art, design

and architecture (Biggs and Büchler, 2007), but other terms are also used (Biggs and Büchler, 2008) to refer to an activity which does not coincide with – but whose methodology should not be that different from – what is done in 'hard disciplines'. In general, practice-based research has been defined in the following terms: "[r]esearch in which the professional and/or creative practices of art, design or architecture play an instrumental part in an inquiry" (Rust et al., 2007, p. 11). This does not imply that "practice is a method of research or… a methodology", because it refers to an activity which can be used in research, but "the method… must always include an explicit understanding of how the practice contributes to the inquiry and research is distinguished from other forms of practice by that explicit understanding" (Rust et al., 2007, p. 11).

The issue, therefore, is whether it is practice that makes things different, and to what extent a rigorous method can be applied to practice in order to attain goals which can be defined as research products (Büchler et al., 2008). In short, a practitioner is not required to provide responses to research questions and innovate knowledge, even when his or her products are characterized by originality and creativity. On the other hand, a researcher is expected to contribute to knowledge even when he or she is developing a project through practice, which means relying on previous work, formulating hypotheses, using an appropriate method, and providing evidence that the results obtained are new and respond to questions of general interest. This process marks a difference from professional practice, and defines an activity that is different from study. Research does not, in fact, simply mean discovering something previously unknown to the researcher; it means discovering something that is new to the entire scientific community. This implies applying a rigorous method in order to analyse previous work and providing an assessment of results by peer-review processes (Biggs and Büchler, 2007).

With regard to knowledge, it has been recalled that, following Newton, "we are dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants", and it has been affirmed that it is a cumulative process in planning (Rocco et al. 2009). We unquestionably rely on work that has previously been done by others, but innovation implies applying this legacy critically, and research requires formulating hypotheses, applying methods which allow analyses and tests to

be repeated, basing conclusions on evidence, and disseminating results. Creativity and practice can be useful in order to adopt innovative points of view or to make use of non-traditional approaches and methods. They intervene in the process, but cannot replace research benchmarks, and products must be assessed with regard to questions of general interest. The "isolationist position" (Biggs and Büchler, 2008), which means that a discipline can decide what research means and what the terms are for assessing results on its own initiative, cannot be defended in a scientific environment. As a consequence, "ineffability" cannot be used as an argument for defending creative practices not respecting – or replacing - sound research methods.

In many countries, art, design and architecture were (and to some extent still are) taught in non-university institutions (such as Polytechnics, *Écoles d'Architecture*, and *Fachhochschulen*), the theory being that practice and creativity can be transmitted and developed, but do not require a close connection with research. In recent times, the shift by these institutions from vocational schools to universities or university-like structures, the activation of quality assessment procedures, and the competition for the assignment of financial resources have implied a more active role in research, which requires a definition of what research means for creative and professional disciplines.

The authors quoted above conclude that a more precise definition of "practice-based research" would be pointless, because what counts is a rigorous method to "meet all of the conditions of the existing academic model of research" (Biggs and Büchler, 2007, p. 68). In fact, it is not accepted that "academic research that is developed in these areas should enjoy special privileges because the area would be in some way special" (Büchler et al., 2008, p. 11).

3. An analytical framework

Research can be developed only applying a scientific method; this is true of both general rules (as briefly defined above) and the approaches and methodologies specific to each discipline, which have been (and continue to be) developed within a scientific environment made up of academic networks (such as universities, research centres, and scientific societies),

journals and published vehicles, and events that stimulate interactions among scientists. In short, a discipline usually relies on a 'disciplinary infrastructure' that allows researchers to obtain information and experience new stimuli, to expose their ideas, to disseminate their products, and to obtain reactions from their peers.

An 'infrastructure' such as this is difficult to construct for planning, and in fact it has yet to be consolidated, because it is a composite discipline that draws issues, methods and tools from a variety of fields. This characteristic arises out of the diversity of "purposes, objects, procedures, and identities" involved, and subject-related roots that "are not just in the sciences, with their belief in analysis and causality, but also in the understanding of social relations… and the aesthetic concerns of the design professions" (Beauregard, 2001, p. 438). This "diffuse discipline" must therefore confront a "wide diversity in disciplinary goals, theoretical concepts, methods, and standards for judging scholarly quality and validity" (Goldstein, 2012, p. 494).

With regard to the operational aspects of the discipline, the planning tradition is founded on political-administrative and legal issues and the associated decision-making and consensus-building aspects, on the one hand, and on physical planning on the other. Both strands, especially the latter, are oriented towards collecting and transmitting knowledge and developing solutions through practice, so that "the scholarship of discovery is underserved in the planning discipline" (Hopkins, 2001, p. 399). The need to expand "our set of explanations about how the world works to increase our capacity to cope with the world" (Hopkins, 2001, p. 400) to define planning as a scientific discipline therefore remains unsatisfied. Explanations must, in fact, be regarded as "causal mechanisms sufficient to make sense of observable phenomena" (Hopkins, 2001, p. 400). This implies that to define the scientific basis of planning means sharing not only objectives but also methods and tools, because "for any given field of inquiry, there must be agreement on a core of relevant causal mechanisms, agreement on stopping rules about what depth of explanation is sufficient, and agreement on criteria for better or worse explanations" (Hopkins, 2001, p. 399).

Another aspect relates to how knowledge can be developed, and in this regard the culture of planning has been defined as oscillating between two

poles: incremental (or cumulative) versus integrative knowledge. While the latter means a capacity for "drawing together the big ideas from discoveries by others" (Forsyth, 2012, p. 162), the former relies on a process which should both increase and select knowledge. This expectation goes hand in hand with the hope that in the long run, "planners can speak with a single voice". It has been observed that this is an unjustified position to take, because planners "need to accept the fuzzy boundaries of planning, the endemic incompleteness of professional control, and the healthy and relentless internal criticism" (Beauregard, 2001, p. 439). In short, what is required of planners is not only a critical attitude, but also research, because development of the discipline cannot rely on a cumulative process in view of "speaking with a single voice". Instead, we must consider that the definition of scientific paradigms, to use Kuhn's terminology, can only be pursued in the presence of an appropriate environment (a 'disciplinary infrastructure') that allows us to discuss, select and validate hypotheses and results.

The material published in journals reflects the effectiveness of disciplinary mechanisms, in particular concerning what is considered to be 'research product'. Published contributions deserve an analysis, therefore, which can be carried out by relying on a framework that recalls the basic conditions for research, the cultures within which activities are developed, and the various styles adopted by researchers. Based on recent literature (in particular: Forsyth and Crewe, 2006), research must define goals, make use of appropriate methods, relate to prior work, develop arguments, provide documentation and perform evaluations, submit results for peer review, and publish results.

Various research cultures can be recognized in planning, reflecting diverse goals and approaches. In particular, the following have been described (Forsyth, 2012):

- scientific frontiers (focused on sectoral issues, operating in collaboration with other scientists, and adopting an incremental knowledge perspective);
- practical applications (operating within the framework of current knowledge, and making use of certain research products);
- assessing practice (developing practices worthy of analysis, or studying practices that have already been applied);

- enduring questions (addressing the bigger, more challenging, and recurrent issues of the good and the right, of power and values, and the role of planning).

Finally, research is developed by adopting different styles which relate to the methodology adopted and reflect diverse approaches. To draw from a previously quoted author (Forsyth, 2012), these styles can be defined as empirical, logical argumentation/theory, critical/interpretive, and synthesis. Yet more can be defined.

This framework permits us to support an analysis of recent Italian literature which demonstrates that Italian journals devote little space to research articles. There is nothing odd about this if we consider that they are aimed not only at academics but also at practitioners, and that they have manifold aims, such as to spread information, provide good examples, or reflect on experiences. In short, the expected innovation relates to a number of different aspects: the topics addressed, the approaches and the methodology adopted, and the tools used, and it is not only research that is involved in contributing to these aspects.

4. Research products in an evolving disciplinary environment. An inquiry into the Italian journals.

The Italian case reflects the international debate, but preserves certain specificities, in particular the key role of physical-statutory planning, the engagement of the academic world in practical activities (often of a professional nature), and the unstable relationship between research and teaching. Over recent decades, research has seen innovation, but also a continuity of approach and practice. Notwithstanding the attention paid to new topics and the use of new technologies (such as computer graphics and GIS), urban design in particular tends to follow consolidated methodologies, which means connections with practice, analysis of cases and experiences, and the transfer of knowledge. On the other hand, new issues and methods have been introduced that deal with the planning process, policy analysis methods, and socio-economic approaches.

At the root of the discipline there is the practice of Urbanistica, which was based on urban design, legal and administrative procedures and the practice

of drawing up plans, all constituting what has been defined the "urbanism tradition" (CEC, 1997; Espon, 2007).

The academic structure, defined in the 1920s by merging artistic disciplines and practices from academies of fine arts and scientific and technical knowledge and know-how from engineering schools, evolved in the 1960s and 1970s, when rapid economic, social and territorial transformations invested the country. Design was not sufficient to provide responses to such complex phenomena, which needed the application of socio-economic methods and a specific attention to the decision-making process. New changes have taken place in recent years, in particular due to technical innovations, the emergence of environmental issues, connections with economic and local development programmes, and the need to involve stakeholders and the population at large in decisions. The legal framework was also modernized by an amendment to the Constitution in 2001, which introduced the term 'government of territory' in place of 'urbanistica', reflecting the changes in approaches and practices we have described above. The array of issues which must now be faced needs a variety of methods and instruments. This condition might be considered either "a weakness – making it difficult for planners to know exactly what belongs to planning", or a "key strength" (Davoudi, 2010, p. 33) that widens the scope of the discipline. There is undoubtedly a risk of fragmentation of the discipline due to the coexistence of different – and sometimes conflicting – theories and methods (Mazza, 2002).

In recent times, the academic disciplinary strand oriented towards urban design has been partially absorbed by architecture, although urban planning makes use of physical-architectural methods, while expanding in a variety of areas.

In the 1980s, doctoral schools were established in Italy. For the first time, 'learning by research' was formalized, which boosted the research-based education of the new generations of academics. But it is only recently that competition among the various disciplines has become tougher, in particular following the establishment of research assessment practices and the definition of new parameters for the selection and promotion of academics. This process required a definition of what 'research products' deserve consideration, superseding the tradition that everything that is published has

to be accounted for, while 'bibliometric' methods, meaning inclusion in databases such as ISI, Scopus and the like, are being increasingly used (Zanon, 2012). At the same time, the process of defining what research must mean is too slow, and there is the risk that some disciplines will be left behind in a competitive environment in which others can boast internationally-recognized rankings expressed in publications in refereed journals, citation counts, etc. In fact, certified products must be compared with an array of contributions that are difficult to assess, such as projects, exhibitions, and publication in magazines where images prevail over written content. Not only can comparisons not be made, but it is also difficult to understand whether there is innovation when design products are not accompanied by critical reflection and articles do not define hypotheses, express a method, or provide evidence, and peer review processes are not set in motion. Defending specificities that avoid the need to define what research is cannot be accepted.

Italian journals, it has been observed, are "mostly magazines oriented to professionals rather than… academic journals", although many are "good quality publications, but lack the features required, such as a prestigious editorial board, a reliable publisher able to cover different markets and to guarantee the continuity of publication, and, most importantly, peer-review procedures and inclusion in certification mechanisms" (Zanon, 2012, p. 116). In general, articles cover a variety of issues and topics, describe experiences and plans, address technical and legal issues, propose new topics and points of view, and transfer knowledge from other disciplines and places. Their styles are therefore varied, and mirror an individual journal's or magazine's traditions and mission.

In general, articles are not organized as they usually are in international journals: only a few focus on problems by analysing them on the basis of the 'state of the art', formulating hypotheses, and developing a discussion in the light of the evidence found after application of an empirical method. In many cases, articles 'take a position' not only in the disciplinary debate, but also in the political-institutional discussion, and consider that the 'impact' of what academics state should be measured in terms of changes in the political environment, administrative organization, and planning decisions.

One initial point to be considered relates to the nature (or the 'mission') of

these journals. Generally speaking, Italian journals were traditionally founded by groups of intellectuals (architects, planners, or academics) who had close associations with a common ideological orientation, be it scientific, artistic, or political. As a result, articles were (and in many cases still are) written on demand by the editorial board (or the editor him/herself, in the case of an influential personality), and therefore peer review was not applied. This mechanism is still largely used, but in many cases it is possible to propose articles or thematic groups of articles, and the selection is made by the editor (sometimes with the support of referees).

A second, but connected, point relates to the fact that journals follow a clearly-defined editorial policy which influences not only the topic being addressed but also the format of articles and the style employed. In particular, the content of journals is in many cases organized to create 'special issues', or 'collections of articles'. These usually consist of an introduction and a series of short contributions, and may be the result of a research project or an investigation carried out by posing a question and collecting responses. The quality of each article cannot easily be assessed, because the information conveyed is defined by the overall collection, and the efforts of the editor cannot be restricted to just a few written pages.

Another aspect to be considered is the divide between urban design and urban planning. Some journals only publish articles of one type, while others accept both. The former are generally journals that are mainly oriented towards architecture and are open to urban design (such as *Casabella* or *Domus*), or specifically oriented towards urban design (*Paesaggio Urbano*) and those that deal with socio-economic issues or the planning process (for example, *Archivio di Studi Urbani e Regionali* or *Urbanistica Informazioni*). Some journals combine both strands (for example, *Urbanistica* and *Territorio*).

The inquiry carried out in this study is a first step towards a wider analysis. It has taken into consideration the most representative Italian journals on planning: *Urbanistica, Archivio di Studi Urbani e Regionali, Territorio,* and one of urban design: *Paesaggio Urbano*. Recent issues have been critically analysed in light of the above framework.

6. Article types and writing styles

A number of different aspects must be considered when analysing articles in search of 'research products': first of all the type of contributions as regards the specificity of the host journal, then the topics addressed within a specific disciplinary culture, and finally the communicative style adopted. To be quoted in this regard is a recent analysis of planning publications, on occasion of an award assigned by the Italian Urban Planning Institute (*Istituto Nazionale di Urbanistica*), which identified different 'literary genres' (biographies, histories, case studies, theories, descriptions, urban policies, state of the art descriptions, invectives, handbooks, textbooks, planning documents) as well as a number of common approaches (historical, theoretical, professional) (Moccia, 2012).

The publications here considered cover a wide array of topics and motivations for writing on urban planning. The analysis focuses on how the results of research are disseminated, and conversely, on how much research is at the basis of what is written.

In general, Italian planning articles are not much different from the contributions published in journals, and in professional magazines in particular, of other countries, although only a few are organized in the consolidated form of international academic publications. In architecture- and urban design-oriented journals, articles are generally short (1500-5000 words), and make use of maps and illustrations. These contributions cannot develop an argument fully, and often provide 'links' to other materials (such as research reports, projects, and figures). Journals covering theoretical or socio-economic topics carry longer articles which do not necessarily make use of graphics.

As said, edited collections of articles represent a common way of organizing contributions. This model implies identification of an emerging issue, and in many cases a claim to be made. Articles therefore tend to be short, to focus on a very specific aspect, and to adopt different writing styles, in particular because the authors are not only academics but also professionals and 'eye-witnesses'. Collections of articles allow a large number of authors to make a personal contribution, but they tend to repeat the introductory statements and preliminary descriptions. In other disciplines, longer articles, often with

multiple authors, are more common. Some published issues present the results of research projects (in particular those supported by national funds for cooperation among universities), while many others collect contributions based on personal reflections or experiences rather than research results. Direct involvement in plan-drafting processes, administrative activities, or associations often forms the basis for proposing an argument and supporting a claim.

Another common category of articles includes those which describe applied research experiences, mostly funded by local authorities, in which even larger academic groups are often involved. These underline the continuing existence of certain areas linked to long-established practices (land-use planning, in particular), together with the emergence of new topics relating to urgent matters requiring new research and the development of appropriate proposals. There is nothing odd about these ties between research and the specificity of places and cases: they are typical of the discipline. The quality and level of interest of the results differ, because some experiences provide contributions of a professional standard, while others present opportunities for 'practice-based research' where academics can test hypotheses or methodologies. In any event, what is expected from articles on such specific topics is an ability to generalize the methodology and project approach so they can be of interest to a wide readership.

Research can also be connected to teaching. Many experiences are based on a 'project methodology' that involves students (sometimes PhD candidates) in the development of a project for a place where a 'demand for planning' has been devised or clearly expressed by a local administration. Published articles therefore present research products in the form of projects developed by researchers or students under the supervision of teachers. In these cases, the aim being the illustration of an educational experience whose goal regards the transfer of knowledge, not research, a coherent process of hypotheses formulation, search for evidence, and assessment of results is rarely developed. In some way the idea conveyed is that a good project is anyhow innovative, because able to address clearly-defined issues appropriately, demonstrating an ability to respond to questions in the visible form of a designed proposal.

The disciplinary culture proper in the 'urbanism tradition' emerges in many articles, first of all due to the close connection between physical planning

and the other topics which marks the Italian approach, and then because the need to make a claim and affirm a point of view is similar to the role of an architect, who needs to demonstrate his or her ability to find an appropriate or creative solution.

As far as style is concerned, the first type is descriptive. The goal of an article is to spread new information and illustrate a specific approach, a method, or a peculiar solution which deserves attention and can be replicated. A good description implies selection of the objects and phenomena to be observed and transmitted: this is a key aspect when illustrating a complex document such as a plan or a project, because what must be conveyed is not only basic knowledge (what is being done, what techniques are being used, what results have been attained), but also methodological aspects.

More analytical methods are applied when hypotheses are assessed that go beyond mere description. This entails making use of disciplinary methodologies, in particular when new topics, innovative approaches, and technical issues are being treated.

Another type relates to 'taking a position'. Discussion of certain issues requires not only presentation of an argument but also proposals of an approach or an intervention, and the modalities for doing this can differ enormously. In certain cases in particular, the weight of the author is considered to be a sound argument to be used to influence the readership. The proximity of the discipline to politics often attenuates theoretical analysis in favour of more ideologically-oriented positions.

7. Research products in Italian journals. Some conclusions

If we consider the results of the investigation in light of the framework described above, it is possible to draw some provisional conclusions. One preliminary consideration relates to the motivations behind writing an article, which may be quite different (Moccia, 2012), and even contradictory. There is undoubtedly a need to communicate, describe, and explain, but there is also the desire of the author to gain visibility and/or to acquire credit in the academic or professional environment. This is the case with urban planning, which is an 'inclusive discipline' that can progressively absorb various topics by making use of diverse methods and tools. What is written,

therefore, is not necessarily based on a previous study, and communicative styles vary to an extraordinary degree. This does not mean that these articles serve no purpose, or that they do not deserve attention: information, descriptions of good practices, or analyses of successful (or unsuccessful) experiences are always important.

A second, but connected, consideration relates to the already-emphasised nature of Italian journals: they only devote a certain amount of space to research articles that follow internationally consolidated formats. The result is that many of the articles published in international journals by Italian authors would probably not have been published in Italian journals, which are only partially oriented towards academia, and mostly aim at a wider audience.

In general, knowledge development and innovation are pursued through a cumulative process, by adding new fields and topics, proposing new points of view, and transferring methods and tools from other disciplines. This approach tends to preserve the traditional connection between physical-organizational and procedural aspects.

Only some of the contributions analysed are oriented towards redirecting the discipline or proposing new methods based on a cohesive formulation of hypotheses, empirical analysis, and discussion of evidence. From a methodological point of view, this is the only way to develop research, and the nature of urban planning does not prevent one from working in this way.

A focus on new fields of research is often regarded as innovation *per se*. Addressing issues such as “infrastructures and landscape”, “military brownfield reclamation”, and “urban agriculture” means devoting attention to aspects which had been ignored, and which require - albeit only in part - the use of new methods and tools. It should be stressed that it is expected that opening up new areas will provide visibility for the researcher (or author), who then becomes a pioneer. In some cases, this kind of ‘innovation’ is supported by new terminology, which often uses (or misuses) English expressions, or is based on the transfer of knowledge from one place to another, but appropriate analysis of the specificities required to avoid a mere ‘transplant’ of topics or practices following modish trends is not always performed.

The conclusions which can be drawn from the study of the presence and

quality of research products in Italian journals are by no means negative. It is not yet possible to elaborate precise statistics, but a number of considerations can be made by using the framework proposed above, in light of Forsyth's classification.

Most of the articles address practical applications and/or assess practice. While in the former case plans and projects are mostly treated using a descriptive writing style, in the latter experiences are analysed and case studies developed, and the arguments presented must rely on analytical concepts and tools. Only a few articles address 'enduring questions' that represent theoretical and methodological issues, but they can be of considerable significance, even though they often put forward a specific point of view or ideological position. Finally, a growing number of studies address 'scientific frontiers': technical aspects and the use of new technologies or innovative approaches. In many cases, they propose methods and tools that have been developed in other disciplines, thus widening the scope of urban planning and its toolbox.

The style adopted reflects the nature of the article, with a prevailing use of description and analyses that are not always based on precise theoretical assumptions. Different styles are adopted by papers that address 'scientific frontiers', theoretical issues, or reviews of approaches and methods.

As far as references to prior work is concerned, articles of an analytical and theoretical nature and those addressing 'scientific frontier' issues generally quote the literature (mostly Italian) and experiences (plans, good practices, etc.) extensively, but cross-reference controls are not in place, and the impact of the article cannot be measured in a formalized (measurable) manner.

In short, the following classification of the goals and types of articles can be proposed.

1. Enlarging the disciplinary scope.
   The articles that fall into this category tend to 'set an agenda': they propose new topics and/or points of view, and in particular devise emerging 'needs for planning'. An incremental attitude lies at the basis of this approach, and the proposed method relates to a proposal for 'new insights' and the ability to formulate topics, including the use of appropriate terminology. Examples are articles on "Mafia

Territories in Northern Italy" or "University Cities".

2. Innovating scientific approaches and methods.
   These articles address topics (some of which are not especially new) that require the use of technical knowledge and know-how, such as GIS and landscape ecology, but also issues like citizens' participation. These are the preferred fields for the use of research methods through formulating hypotheses, searching for evidence, and drawing conclusions.
3. Innovating and consolidating planning practices.
   The focus here is on everyday planning activities. The approach adopted can be defined as 'professional-like', because the issues addressed require the ability to focus on problems, devise alternatives, and provide solutions. The key method is practice.
4. Observing and analysing practices and experiences.
   This approach focuses on certain relevant cases, and deconstructs the process by making use of different methods, one of the key ones being the 'policy analysis' approach. The various levels of this approach include observation, narration, and analysis.
5. Describing experiences.
   This method can be defined as 'transferring knowledge', in the tradition of plan and project descriptions and applying the more recent 'best practices' approach. There is often the hope that innovation will emerge from a 'transplant' intervention.

In conclusion, research in planning cannot be regarded as an activity that differs from other disciplines as far as basic methodology is concerned. Innovation undoubtedly emerges from a variety of contributions and practices, which are not always based on research. Italian journals support the spread of knowledge effectively, even though the space devoted to research products may not be especially extensive: in fact, articles only relate to the results of research projects in part, while they frequently present case studies and experiences, or advance claims. Academics also tend to publish in a variety of journals and professional magazines that do not always apply peer-review processes. This does not imply that the articles

have a reduced impact, however, because they enjoy a wide audience that extends beyond the circles of the particular discipline and involves professionals and managers. In any event, the risk is that the areas of concern to the discipline will be expanded by the addition of new topics and the accumulation of new methods and tools without evidence being provided of their relevance and effectiveness.

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