

## **Verticality and entrepreneurship, the initial directions of the project. A dialogue with Gabriele Albertini**

*Through your mandate as Mayor you have followed the initial stages of the Porta Nuova project. Several years on, how would you describe this experience?*

With respect to these large-scale projects of urban development, the local administration plays the role of director who brings together all those factors which will ensure the success of *The Great Beauty*. Let me recall what Gerald Hines told me, when at one of our meetings I asked him why he had chosen to invest two billion in the city of Milan. He answered: "This is one of the central areas of a large European metropolis, one of the last available ones of this extent, in which I can carry out my work. I am a real estate developer, so I can recruit the best architects to leave their mark in the world of architecture. I am also an entrepreneur, and we believe that this might be an opportunity for our company and for profit. Moreover, there is another reason that concerns you personally and that stands to your credit: we have done our homework and it turns out that your administration, unlike that of other cities in Italy or abroad, has no 'card-dealer' who gives out the cards before the game is on". I like to think that honesty and entrepreneurship are not in conflict, and Hines and Catella have been able to prove it. Hines has invested this sum in the hope of being able to run its race with no ballasts—no advantages or disadvantages to be overcome by circuitous means.

Architecture is the one art that brings everything together: painting, calculation, capital and politics. All the great works of architecture that have been built over the centuries have had their patrons—be they popes, states or local communities. I like to think that this, in a way, has also been the case during my nine years in office. This area of Milan boasts an urban development of the highest level: Piazza Gae Aulenti feels like New York!

*The project has also been a great opportunity to reshape Milan.*

Hines is right: we had no "card-dealers" and no outstanding debts. When I summoned the sixty owners of the plots (we owned about half of the area and De Mico owned another portion), I told them that we had been waiting to enhance their properties for close to sixty years, discussing weights and measures without ever reaching an agreement. Our suggestion was to deal with the properties as though they were part of a large housing estate: so much for the property owned, so much for the development rights—and clearly this also applied to us as a Municipality. The idea was to follow the integrated development plan, so as to have one quota for the green area, one for services, one for housing and one for commercial venues. In other words, a varied arrangement that would preserve the existing balance. I told the owners that if they were interested, they should discuss things and then get back to us to define the various details; if not, they could wait another sixty years. They came back after a week, having reached an agreement, and this is what happened.

*The most important aspect of this project, its great achievement, is the public areas. Actually, it seems as though public space is what has ensured the success of all the main projects developed in Milan over the past decade.*

I believe that what we have is more of a combination of architecture and public space. Then there is verticality which—above as much as below (since we are also exploiting the underground)—stands as a symbol of urban quality. It was our administration that first provided an impetus towards the definition of a new skyline: it is with us that Milan got its skyscrapers. The green areas are of the sort you might find near your house and experience in everyday life (trees, small fountains, a park for walking your dog)—it is not like a green belt, which has a different significance and scale. This is what "urban quality" means for me; but in order to achieve it, the volumes must be compatible with the costs for the regeneration and transformation of the post-industrial areas. Hence, private owners must be assigned a space adequate to the expenses they will incur. But if what one is after is the urban quality ensured by having a green area just outside one's doorstep, then tall buildings are called for, so as to save land. These have been our hallmarks: honesty, entrepreneurship and—from the point of view of urban development—verticality.



*Councillor Verga has told us something about you: "When I was invited to take up the post of Urban Planning Councillor by Albertini, one of our three main goals was to fix the Garibaldi-Repubblica area". Now that the work has been completed, have you had the chance to walk through the area? What do you make of it?*

I am very happy with what I have seen and the people—private citizens—have often stopped me in the street to compliment me.

The excellence of the people I have worked with—first Lupi and then Verga—makes me proud. Both of them—who, for all their differences, have so much in common—have been great Urban Planning councillors and we can be proud of what has been achieved to them. As a boss, I have been lucky and capable enough to choose people better at things than myself, while keeping them all together. Some members of my team have come a very long way, while others already held leading positions, such as the Vice Chancellor of the Polytechnic.

*Years ago it might seem that, with regard to the great urban transformations that were then coming into being, the local administration was always a step behind compared to private entrepreneurs. What was missing was a plan, an image of the city. Today, being better acquainted with the complex mechanisms involved, it seems that one must rely on mechanisms of mutual support.*

This is my idea as well. When people would tell me that I lacked an overall "vision", I used to give the example of a flock or sailing ship. Anyone familiar with the history of the civic community of Milan, with its dynamism and the inquisitive spirit of its working class and enlightened entrepreneurs, is bound to wonder: how could the city possibly be led? I approach this city with genuine humility. I can only strive to ensure the best possible conditions for this lively and dynamic community to express itself. Milan is a sailing ship, not a flock: what it needs is not a person to drive it with a stick, but a person who can simply provide the right incentives.

*(Gabriele Albertini, former Mayor, Milan City Council)*