Dramatically Innovative:
Science and Technology Parks as Urban Regenerators in Italian Cities
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Since the 1990s Italian local governments seemed something to be bewitch by research and innovation. Big, medium or even small sized cities have proposals for new spaces for innovation and research centers. They were considered as the strategy to valorise local identity and enhance regional competition. When one considers that there are several empty urban areas that need redevelopment, and cities are loosing their industrial functions and symbol, such a suggestion appears reasonable. In the context of the globalisation of R&D activities, many urban economies have attempted to create places for research and innovation – Science and Technology Parks (STPs) – in the hope of embedding these activities. While experiences in other industrialised countries or in different time have had great ambitions, STPs are born in Italy in recent years as an urban regeneration strategy, that provide technology transfer from universities to companies. As far as ownership and foundation are concerned, Italy represents a unique case because the STPs are an initiative of local municipalities.

International literature on the actual performance of STPs is not unanimous. Someone argues that they are not major sources of technology development and technology transfer. It is argued that exaggerated expectations often legitimate huge real estate developments. This paper examines the myth of research and innovation in three Italian cities with less than 150,000 inhabitants. Over the 1990s, in Novara, Marghera, and Ascoli heavy industries moved out of the urban structures. Industrial restructuring is leading the cities to a knowledge-based economy, represented by STPs. NovaraSviluppo in Novara and Vega in Marghera are in progress STPs: in the final appearance there are distinctive education and culture facilities, residential facilities, and business institutions. The cities’ effort to innovate is mainly paid back in large-scale and market oriented urban projects. A costly initial destruction or land decontamination need investments. So far local governments support property-based initiatives to encourage urban regeneration, where STPs act catalysts for change (Westhead and Batstone 1998).

NovaraSviluppo is a Foundation that was established to preserve former research institutes, incubate innovative companies and enhance the synergy between universities and companies. When the productive landscape changed, the public oriented Foundation has been transformed into a STP, with top research resources, specialized universities’ research centers and blossoming innovative start-up firms that are re-animating a declining urban compound. Vega, in Marghera-Venice, is a massive and single urban regeneration project, with space for several activities; different clusters identify four major development interests (nano and biotechnology; ITC; green technology; heritage protection technology). Both parks produce innovation, measured with patents, but – and most important in the present urban balance – they are valorising and qualifying the city, and real estate interests.

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Ascoli instead is a tentative stp, or a decaying industrial plant with few employees and a multinational ownership. The city projects to have such kind of space for innovation, with not so clear ideas about the content. That seemed less important – at a first glance – than the possible uses and re-uses of space, the public functions and also employment. The process suddenly stopped because of radical divergences among municipality and province.

Recent stps in Italy are manifestos of urban renewal. They concentrate and catalyse public and private regeneration efforts into a precise area and with a clear scope. Local governments alone cannot afford the renewal costs, thus the public sets a framework to private property-based business and this pay back projected returns in the form of equalised investments on the site, like in NovaraSviluppo case.

By providing small units with flexible lease terms, stps effectively support firms start-up. Clearly parks might do more in clustering together similar firms. As a consequence, stps intrinsically avoid to act as a merely market oriented business (Gower and Harris 1994). This also means that a fundamental public role of tutoring is expected by stp director boards. Referred to this, for example, Vega’s main effort to enhance a new concept of industry in Marghera has as first important achievement the environmental regeneration of its land, and the expertise in site remediation as main content of the clusters Vega-Environment and Vega-Beniculturali.

In the three examined cities it is found that adequate institutional thickness, trust, and cooperation apply only to stp projects that are integrated and embedded with communities background. When these are not effective, as in Ascoli, it is reasonable to doubt the real possibilities of stps. It is not an answer for policy makers, but stps are not magic wands for areas that never had self-generated innovation and also have scarce visible potentiality to compete for any firms localisation as long as smartly innovative.

Hence, to conclude, real estate investments should be considered components of stps, as far as it is true that urban development – quoting J. Jacobs (1984) – will continue to be far more influenced by local and regional institutions and groups than directly by abstracted innovation.