

CARTOGRAPHIES OF CATASTROPHES

DISASTER DOCUMENTATION AND
RECONSTRUCTION PLANS IN EUROPE

1821—PRESENT

edited by

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Chapter 6

Mapping the Destruction and Reconstruction of Italian Cities in World War II

The Case of Brescia

Carlotta Coccoli

Abstract

In Italy shortly before the end of the Second World War, a Legislative Decree (1 March 1945, No. 154) was issued containing 'Norms for reconstruction plans for war-damaged settlements'. In subsequent years, numerous Italian municipalities adopted this urban planning instrument, which aimed to heal the wounds of war while trying to preserve 'the structure and character of the urban centre'. The reconstruction plans often included documents and maps of the damaged and destroyed buildings, mainly relating to the oldest parts of cities, which served as the basis for developing new plans. In many cases, however, the reconstruction plans were an opportunity to alter historic city centres radically for reasons of traffic mobility and speculation. Analysing damage maps makes it possible to understand and compare the condition of cities before they were destroyed and the post-war design plans. Based on the documentation of war damage and reconstruction, this paper analyses the case of the city of Brescia in the context of Italy as a whole.

INTRODUCTION: ITALIAN CITIES UNDER ATTACK (1940-1945)

Although Italy was bombed for only one month less than Germany during the Second World War, as pointed out above, the bombing of most Italian cities did not capture the world's attention in 1945, and has since remained in the margins of most narratives of the war (Overly 2014, 486).

For the first two years of the war, much of Italy was spared from heavy air raids. This changed in the autumn of 1942, when the war in North Africa turned in the Allies' favour and Italy became the main target of bombing raids. By the end of the year, the carpet-bombing of such major northern Italian cities as Genoa, Turin, and Milan had begun. It is worth noting that British analysts were surprised that damage caused by incendiary bombs after these first attacks on large Italian cities was far less than that generally experienced in Germany. The reason for this, according to detailed reports on the vulnerability

of traditional Italian buildings, was down to construction characteristics, which included the extensive use of solid stone and marble for walls and floors, as well as the configuration of urban aggregates made up of large courtyards and wider streets. As modern multi-storey buildings with enclosed courtyards were considered more vulnerable than traditional, older constructions, it was recommended that high explosives be dropped on the former (Overy 2014, 513).

The bloodiest phase of the Allied air raids and ground fighting began after the signing of the armistice between the Kingdom of Italy and the Allied countries (8 September 1943) and continued until the end of the conflict in Italy (late April 1945). During the last two years of the war, various strategies were employed at different times with the aim of undermining the morale of the Italian population to erode popular support for the Fascist regime, shutting down the Mediterranean ports, or destroying rail and road links (Villa 2010, 12). Although the aim of the attacks were strategic targets, they frequently had significant 'secondary effects' on residential areas in the immediate vicinity.

The Allies also took some initiatives to minimize unnecessary damage caused by the bombing of monuments and sites of artistic importance in Italy, but these did not significantly affect the war strategy, which remained focused on the overthrow of the Fascist regime.

One of the most interesting initiatives, as concerns its impact on the cities, was taken in autumn 1943 by the Commander of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces (MAAF). Special photographic reconnaissance flights were carried out over 79 towns in central and northern Italy, these flights recorded the exact location of the main monuments and places sheltering works of art. The towns were then divided into three categories (A, B, and C) according to their presumed artistic importance. The annotated aerial photographs and the classification of the cities were intended to give information to Allied bomber crews that could avoid unnecessary damage to cultural targets during air raids. It was not permitted to bomb Category A cities of Rome, Florence, Venice, and Torcello under any circumstances without prior approval from MAAF headquarters. The towns designated as Category B (for example, Ravenna, Assisi, San Gimignano, Pavia, Urbino, and Parma) were not to be bombed since they were of little military significance. However, bombing targets in one of them was permitted if deemed necessary for operational reasons. Category C cities (like Brescia, Siena, Pisa, Padua, Bologna, Piacenza, Lucca, and Rimini) were to be treated as significant military objectives to be attacked, and any resulting damage was to be tolerated (Coccoli 2017, 110-11).

Even in places considered inviolable, these directions did not prevent serious destruction. Not only were strategic targets hit, but even some of the most renowned monuments also suffered significant damage when bombs fell on the oldest quarters (Lavagnino 1947).

By the end of the war, Italy's social and economic wounds were clearly visible. The immense ruins left by the bombing and the passage of armies through the cities and towns seemed irreparable (Gioannini and Massobrio 2007, 487).

The need to repair war damage sparked a debate among architects, urban planners and restorers on the many issues raised by the emergency. The interaction between modern construction and the historic built environment, and the question of the urban dimensions of protection, which had to extend beyond individual monuments to include lesser-known historic structures of significant overall value, were among the most challenging issues (Bellini 2011, 14). However, there was no truly interdisciplinary debate. For example, architectural historians and restorers considered the urban planning aspects of the problem to be limited to historic centers, not taking into account the unitary nature of urban planning (Bellini 2011, 38).

As early as 1944, a circular from the Ministry of Education on the 'Restoration and Conservation of the National Artistic Heritage' (Ministry of Education Circular No. 82 1944) stated that urban areas of historical interest should be preserved. However, if these were partially damaged or destroyed in the war, they could be sacrificed in favour of new housing and transport needs. As has been observed by Amedeo Bellini, the ministry's openness would have encouraged numerous speculative operations in Italian cities (Bellini 2011, 37).

Today, there are many well-researched studies on the methodology and content of the debate on the monumental restorations after the conflict (De Stefani and Coccoli 2011; Middione and Porzio 2010; Casiello 2011; Pascolucci 2011; Vitale and Scaturro 2019). However, there is still much to be learned about the fate of urban centers as a whole and how to reconstruct building contexts that, although not individually of great artistic significance, were of great historical and environmental value.¹

This subject is inextricably linked to the field of urban studies and architectural restoration, and requires an understanding of the urban planning instruments put in place to tackle the problem of reconstruction (Treccani 2007, Bonfantini 2021, 4).

REBUILDING INSTRUMENTS: THE STANDARDS AND CONTENT OF RECONSTRUCTION PLANS

1 March 1945. This date on which Legislative Decree No. 154: 'Norms for reconstruction plans for war-damaged settlements' was issued marked the fate of those Italian cities affected by the Second World War. This new and contingent planning instrument (of limited duration) was a detailed plan that had an executive character. It was designed to reconcile the need to repair rapidly war

damage in urban agglomerations with the need to ensure the rational future growth of cities. The extent of reconstruction plans was determined by the level of a town's devastation, ranging from the rebuilding of single neighbourhoods to the reconstruction of entire settlements, as well as the total or partial transfer of settlements to another area (Ministry of Public Works Circular No. 49, 1945). The reconstruction plan was to be integrated with the general town plan in partially destroyed towns that already had one.

A peculiarity of the reconstruction plans, which should be borne in mind regarding their impact on the post-war transformation of Italian cities, was that their approval by the Minister of Public Works was equivalent to a 'declaration of public utility'. As a result, the works provided for in the plans were declared 'urgent and indispensable' and the municipalities were given the right to expropriate the areas earmarked for new buildings (Legislative Decree No. 154, 1945).

The reconstruction plan was a slim document, containing a limited amount of essential data (road and rail networks; areas to be allocated for religious buildings, services and public spaces; areas with buildings to be demolished, rebuilt, repaired, or with special constraints; undeveloped peripheral areas where new neighbourhoods were to be built) which had to be translated into a few selected documents (a plan of the current state of the city after the war destruction; a second with the planned reconstruction; an explanatory report and building regulations). One aspect of the process of drawing up the reconstruction plan that should be emphasized is the importance attached to planimetry, which had to detail the destruction and damage suffered in the built-up area, showing 'with the greatest accuracy the condition of things' (Ministry of Public Works Circular No. 49, 1945). The affected buildings were to be categorized as destroyed, heavily damaged, or slightly damaged, and the areas of intact buildings were also indicated. These four categories were delineated in the drawings using appropriate fields like punctuation, hatching, colouring, and so forth (Ministry of Public Works Circular No. 590, 1945). A few photographs of the destruction could be added to the plan's explanatory report to help people understand the true extent of the damage.

The reconstruction plans also offered the 'possibility of taking advantage of the wartime destruction to improve the hygienic conditions of the built-up area and the road network, to breathe new life into old neighbourhoods, and to locate the necessary services and public offices in suitable places', as was explicitly stated in the *Instructions for the Implementation of Decree No. 154* (Ministry of Public Works Circular No. 49, 1945).

Based on a series of preliminary assessments (extent of damage, demographic and health assessments, etc.), the plan provided for the reconstruction of settlements inside the existing perimeter; partly inside and partly outside

the existing perimeter; or completely outside the existing perimeter of a city (Ministry of Public Works Circular No. 590, 1945).

The first option was preferred because it would ensure the 'preservation of the traditional character of the centre' and respect for private property, and more importantly because it would be cheaper, especially as regards public services (roads, sewers, and facilities in general). Due to their focus on environmental factors, it is fascinating to examine the criteria outlined in the planning guidelines for rebuilding settlements within their old boundaries. By keeping existing streets, they aimed to conserve the structure and character of urban centres. This allowed for the restoration of partially damaged structures as well as for the reuse of the foundations of demolished buildings. This was especially the case in cities of historical and artistic importance, where the preservation of the original environment was considered indispensable. Reconstruction plans could include restrictions on reconstruction for reasons of hygiene (e.g., street sections that were too small, neighbourhoods built in unhealthy locations), to create green spaces in overcrowded centres, for road and traffic requirements (e.g. creating parking spaces, improving roads, etc.), or to preserve panoramic views or space around monuments.

However, in historic and artistic centres, these criteria had to be applied with particular care and common sense, as recent experience had shown that the opening of large spaces in historic districts had altered the 'environmental character' determining the physiognomy of many Italian cities. For the same reason, the problem of sanitary rehabilitation of historic centres could not be solved by widening streets and opening squares and other public spaces up, but by limiting the height of buildings and not restoring all the constructions that had been added to the architectural organism over time. Building density was a crucial consideration for hygiene reasons, especially in the most central areas, where heights above the average in the surrounding area and the creation of super-elevations were to be avoided. Existing super-elevations were to be removed where possible, as they detracted from the aesthetic and hygienic appearance of the built area.

The emphasis on the environmental dimension of the historic core was perhaps the most significant feature of the reconstruction plans in historic, artistic, or characteristic city centres. The concern was not only for the most important and well-known monuments, but also the 'environment of the building complexes comprising the city'. Conservation should thus include minor architecture, 'which in many cases constitutes the environment' (Ministry of Public Works Circular No. 590, 1945).

The environmental factor also had to be considered for new structures in historic districts. The objective was not to propose 'stylistic copies that turned out to be imitations', but rather to ensure new structures fit into their historic

surroundings while respecting volumes and heights. Large structures amidst modest residences, for example, were to be avoided, as were towering buildings adjacent to towers or domes that were to retain their dominant character. The selection of materials and hues, regarded as factors of essential environmental value, was subsequently given special consideration, with the suggestion that traditional local materials be used (Ministry of Public Works Circular No. 590, 1945). In this respect, the guidelines for the reconstruction plans show that they incorporate the most recent trends of the contemporary debate on the delicate issue of the insertion of new buildings in historic centres, which, among other topics, emerged at the international level during the International Conference in Athens in 1931, organized by the League of Nations to discuss problems related to the preservation of architectural monuments (Office international des musées 1933), and then implemented at the Italian level in subsequent regulations (Lamberini 2003, 180-84).

In his speech at the Second National Congress on Town Planning and Construction, held in Rome in June 1948, Achille Bertini Calosso, Superintendent of Monuments and Galleries in Umbria, stressed the importance of these criteria for preserving environmental characteristics in reconstruction plans (Bertini Calosso 1948, 16). His thoughts can be taken as an example of the views of the administrative protection apparatus in Italy. According to Bertini Calosso, it was necessary to avoid ‘adding ruins to ruins’, using war damage as an excuse for the unnecessary demolition of buildings or blocks, which would completely change neighbourhood appearances. Such demolitions were often encouraged to carry out projects that were at odds with the nature and characteristics of the area.

Regarding how new buildings should be built in historic urban centres, he agreed with the substance of the regulations on stylistic imitation, and argued in greater depth about the risks. If the stylistic imitation of a monument seemed ‘arbitrary and cold’, the imitation of a picturesque urban centre was false still and ‘even disgusting’, because ‘the picturesque is the result of a thousand circumstances, mostly random [...], which it is impossible to reproduce’ (Bertini Calosso 1948, 16).

Rather, the best way of preserving the existing environmental character of new buildings in historic settings was to use local materials with their typical colours and to relate to existing buildings in terms of balancing solids and voids, massing, and connections to adjacent streets.

In essence, the superintendent’s main concern was that the reconstruction plans should not deal with routine town planning issues, but with more complex problems caused by war damage that required special expertise and sensitivity, especially in dealing with aesthetic and historical issues. The reconstruction of built-up areas should not turn Italian towns and villages into dull, sad places.

Italy should not lose the primacy of its cities, where history, art, nature and the industrious spirit of the people had left an indelible mark that merited preservation and bequeathing to future generations.

However, this was not always the case. More than 400 plans, encouraged by Legislative Decree No. 154, aimed to rebuild Italy's war-ravaged provincial capitals and small and medium-sized towns. In most cases, building and urban reconstruction responded to the need for housing and the urgency to reactivate the economy through construction activity, but also took the opportunity to carry out major interventions, often causing further damage to the historic environment of the city. Particularly in cities that had suffered only partial war damage, reconstruction plans were often used to complete the modernization initiatives postulated in the nineteenth century, which, as in the case of Brescia, had only been partially realized for various reasons. The historic city was then caught between two opposing forces. On the one hand, there was a drive for renewal, often of poor quality, driven also by the desire to increase land use. On the other hand, there was a focus on completion, restoration or even total renovation, reserved for complexes considered to be of historical and architectural value (Fantozzi Micali 1998, 41).

RECONSTRUCTION PLANS AND THEIR IMPACT ON ITALIAN CITIES. THE CASE OF BRESCIA

The destruction caused by Allied air raids between February 1944 and April 1945 was so severe in Brescia – an important industrial and infrastructure hub, and home to Italian and German hierarchs as well as various ministries of the Italian Social Republic – that the city ranked second only to Milan as regards destruction in Lombardy. The air raids struck not only strategic targets, like the railway line and the industrial area, but also adjacent districts, causing extensive destruction – particularly in the historic centre (Fig. 6.1).

More than 2,000 buildings were damaged (about 35 percent of rooms), of which 135 were destroyed and 615 heavily damaged. Thirty thousand people, about 6,000 families, were left homeless (Treccani 2007, 173).

For these reasons, Brescia was included in the list of municipalities legally required to adopt the reconstruction plan (Ministry of Public Works Decree No. 485, 1946). The task was entrusted to the Municipal Technical Office, which already had a special urban planning section with considerable experience from the 1929 master plan designed by the famous Roman architect Marcello Piacentini. It later worked on the 1941 master plan for construction and expansion of the city, which was suspended to comply with the National Planning Law that came into force in 1942 and ultimately halted due to war events.



Fig. 6.1: Brescia, view from north to south of Corso Martiri della Libertà after the bombing. The bombed church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli can be seen at the top right, overlooking the street. Author's private archive, 458/F.Q.II.320.

As early as the summer of 1945, the Technical Office began to survey the damaged buildings and, in accordance with ministerial regulations, drew them on a scale of 1:1,000. Different colours were used to indicate destroyed (yellow), heavily damaged (brown) and slightly damaged (green) buildings.

In the areas where urban interventions were planned, each building was identified by its own cadastral number (*Piano regolatore di ricostruzione. Relazione 1946*).

Based on this survey, the reconstruction plan focused on the city centre – enclosed by the Garza river and the Venetian walls – and two suburban areas. It divided the city into 15 zones (11 within the Venetian walls) subject to urban interventions and was drawn up in continuity with the predictions of previous urban planning instruments. For the oldest part of the city these were marked by extensive demolitions, culminating in widespread gutting to construct the central Piazza della Vittoria a few years before the Second World War (Treccani 1986, 97-129).

Due to its proximity to the railway station, the south-western part of the city was one of the areas hardest hit by Allied bombing (Fig. 6.1).

This area can be used as an example in analysing the type of intervention in relation to the extent of the damage envisaged in the reconstruction plan. Here, the bombs destroyed not only old houses and residential buildings, but also some of the city's most important monuments. These included the church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli (indicated by the letter A in Figure 6.2), considered the 'artistic jewel of the Brescian Renaissance' (Guerrini 1930, 190), and the imposing Palazzo Salvadego (indicated by the letter B in Figure 6.2), the most important example of 18th-century civil architecture in the city.

The Palazzo Salvadego block, badly damaged by Allied bombardments (Fig. 6.3), had already been affected by the changes foreseen in the 1929 master plan, which aimed to improve access from the nearby Piazza della Vittoria by widening the road (via Dante) that the palace overlooked. These plans were not realized due to the presence of many important monuments in the area, including Palazzo Salvadego. After the war, taking advantage of the destruction, the old idea of widening the road was adopted in the reconstruction plan, which prohibited the reconstruction of some damaged buildings for this reason (*Piano regolatore di ricostruzione, Relazione. 1946*).

Another important aspect was the way that buildings in this central area of the city were to be reconstructed. In Brescia, as in many other Italian cities, the urge and desire for modernity often led to the use of proportions and an architectural language that did not fit the historical urban context, despite the clear indications in the regulations governing the reconstruction plans. Initial ideas for the reconstruction of the demolished part of Palazzo Salvadego even

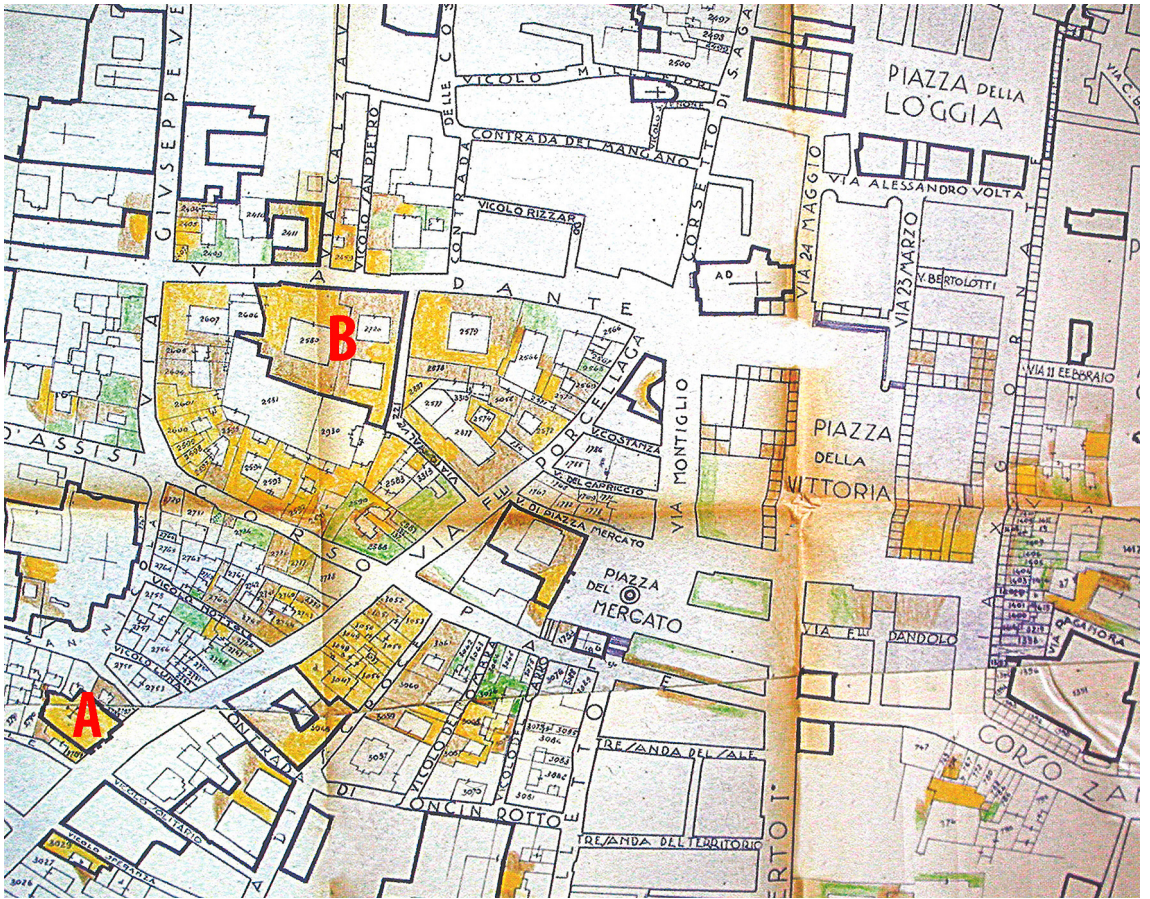


Fig. 6.2: Map of the damage and destruction to Brescia's buildings (1946): detail of the south-western part of the city along the road (via Porcellaga – corso Martiri della Libertà) that connected Piazza della Vittoria to the railway station. Destroyed buildings are coloured yellow, heavily damaged buildings are in brown and slightly damaged buildings are green. The letters A and B refer to the Church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli and Palazzo Salvadego, respectively. First published in Robecchi 2006. Brescia, Archivio Comunale.

proposed the construction of a modern building with 15 floors instead of the existing three, in complete contradiction to the superintendency's instructions.

In that case the bold design ideas were ultimately rejected in favour of a proposal that was more respectful of the historic setting (Coccoli 2021), but there were many substitutions for buildings without obvious monumental value.

In the same area of the city, the road axis leading from Piazza della Vittoria to the railway station was affected by a series of so-called 'diradamenti edilizi' (thinning-out of the urban fabric), made possible by demolishing the dense fabric of buildings deemed poor and unhygienic. They were replaced by modern



Fig. 6.3: Brescia, the Palazzo Salvadego block gutted by the bombing on 13 July 1944. Author's private archive, 455a/F.Q.II.317.

buildings regarded as more in keeping with the area's importance. This north-south road was also affected by a series of interventions to improve the road, such as the widening of entrances to alleys that overlooked it, to create space for parking or for trams.

One of the declared aims of the Brescia reconstruction plan, in addition to the 'improvement of the roads, hygiene and the aesthetics of the city', was the supposed enhancement of monumental and religious buildings by creating more space around them. This was the case with the church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli, which was severely damaged during an Allied bombing raid that devastated the city on 2 March 1945 (Fig. 6.4). This caused the collapse of part of the domes, vaults and arches, but only partially damaged the rector's house, which leaned against the southern side of the church facing the alley (Vicolo delle Stelle). However, it was decided to move the rector's house back and demolish



Fig. 6.4: Brescia. The church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli seen from the south after the bombing on 2 March 1945. In the foreground is the rector's house, which was demolished after the war. Brescia, Fondazione Civiltà Bresciana.



Fig. 6.5: 1950 planimetry of the reconstruction plan for the city of Brescia (Città di Brescia. Piano di ricostruzione, adopted 1947, approved 1950). 1:1,000. Brescia, Archivio di Stato, Archivio RAPU, 9BSC41.

the remaining façade to enhance the church by creating a small green area and widening the entrance to the alley. This direction was shared by the superintendency, which appreciated the idea of partially clearing and insulating the south side of the church to improve the view and increasing the space around the building (Brescia adagio risorge 1947, 3).

A careful comparison between the damage map and the reconstruction plan for the south-western part of the city (Fig. 6.5) reveals that interventions were

concentrated on buildings and areas directly affected by the bombs. However, as was pointed out above, in more than one case the opportunity offered by the destruction was used to carry out transformations that were as close as possible to the predictions of the 1929 master plan, rather than to the pre-existing historical urban and architectural configuration.

This trend is even more evident in other areas of the historic centre of Brescia, where the damage was more limited. In the south-eastern area, for example, the post-war reconstruction plan did not allow some of the damaged buildings to be reconstructed because they were affected by the radical widening of Via Tosio, already planned in the 1929 master plan, which aimed to transform it into a large access road from the east to Piazza della Vittoria. In this case, the route of the widening was already marked on the damage map (which was drawn up primarily to meet legal requirements rather than to provide a solid basis for the project), clearly demonstrating the real objective of the reconstruction plan: to implement the urban planning already conceived by the architect Marcello Piacentini in 1929, taking advantage of the destruction to improve and integrate it, achieving better aesthetic, road and sanitary results.

CONCLUSIONS

The examples described here represent the main ways the reconstruction plan envisaged the transformation of Brescia's damaged urban areas. However, this urban plan, the effectiveness of which lay in its rapid and total application, was not finally approved by the Ministry of Public Works until five years after the end of the war (November 1950), by which time most reconstruction work had already begun and, in many cases, had been completed.

Essentially, therefore, beyond the plan's ambitions, it can be said that the reconstruction of Brescia did not follow an organic project, but was mostly the result of private initiatives and interests that were not always in concert with respect for the environmental character of the city centre or with a far-sighted vision of the future development of the city.

Although a comprehensive comparative study of all the Italian post-war reconstruction plans is still lacking, particularly regarding the correlation between the extent of reconstruction and bomb damage (Bonfantini 2021, 4), it is possible to identify certain trends within which the case of Brescia fits. While a few plans, particularly in the most devastated medium-sized and small towns, aimed at the complete 're-founding' of new and modern cities in new locations, like Cassino, many others aimed at taking advantage of the destruction to intervene in the historic centres, with operations not feasible before the

conflict, with road widening and building replacements that created urban and architectural fractures that are still clearly visible today.

The case of Brescia, for example, is not unlike that of Benevento in Campania, where in 1945 the reconstruction plan was drawn up in a very short time by the Municipal Technical Office, distorting the provisions of the more organic general town plan in force, drawn up by Luigi Piccinato in 1932, which aimed at functional integration between the various parts of the city, including the new residential expansion districts. The reconstruction plan, by contrast, favoured the lucrative exploitation of valuable land in the devastated historic centre, as can be seen by comparing the damage maps with those of the reconstruction project, which was characterized, as in Brescia, by the regularization of the road network and the introduction of intensive construction adapted to modern standards, showing a certain insensitivity towards the surviving historic urban fabric (Vassallo 2007, 106-112). This trend, as was pointed out above, was not limited to the two cities mentioned, but can be considered the norm in the years of post-war reconstruction. While it is true that the awareness of the need for a close relationship between 'town planning and monuments' for the protection of historic cities emerged in the Italian debate as early as the 1940s, the emergency of war, the urgency of solving the problem of homelessness, and the fragility of the legislative instruments available prevented these demands from being put into practice. They were only taken up again in the years that followed (Pane 2017, 99-106).

NOTES

- ¹ In this regard, see the Proceedings of the 10th International Conference 'City and War. Military defences, ruins, permanences of urban memories and images' (Naples, 8-10 June 2023), published in two volumes, available at the following addresses: <http://www.fedoabooks.unina.it/index.php/fedoapress/catalog/book/538> and <http://www.fedoabooks.unina.it/index.php/fedoapress/catalog/book/537>.

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