



*Envisaging L'Aquila* / Edited by  
Alessandro Coppola, Cora Fontana & Valentina Gingardi

ISBN 978-88-908130-8-5

published under CreativeCommons licence 4.0  
by professionaldreamers, 2018

Progetto grafico | Mubi  
Infografiche | Maddalena Falletti  
Immagine di copertina | fotografia di Alessandro Coppola

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Published with the support of the Department of Social Science of the  
Gran Sasso Science Institute, L'Aquila



**edited by**

**Alessandro Coppola, Cora Fontana  
& Valentina Gingardi**

# **ENVISAGING L'AQUILA**

**Strategies, spatialities and sociabilities  
of a recovering city**



**professionalDreamers**

To the city of L'Aquila and its people

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# 1. Engaging with the potential and actual futures in a post-disaster city

Alessandro Coppola, Cora Fontana & Valentina Gingardi

L'Aquila, a city of about 70,000 inhabitants located in Central Italy, was hit by a devastating earthquake on April 6, 2009. This disaster killed 309 people, left about 60,000 homeless and shut down entire areas of its sprawling, dispersed urban system. The number of casualties was much lower than in other powerful earthquakes that occurred in Italy in the past four decades, but its physical and social impact was magnified by the fact that – for the first time – its epicentre was located in a regional capital city.

In particular, the conditions of the historic city centre – with its heritage value – attracted wide national and international attention. Such attention was strategically boosted by the high political investment that the Italian Government made in the mediatisation of post-emergency management operations. L'Aquila was even made the site for the hosting a G8 Summit just two months after the earthquake.

The disaster, coupled with massive public policy intervention, inevitably raised the question of what kind of city should be rebuilt. To answer this question inevitably required an acknowledgement of the fact that, in order to cope with local and global challenges, the city of tomorrow was to be different from the previous one. Referring to the European consensus on urban policy (European Commission – DGRP, 2011), it was clear how, on the one hand, in order to implement the three pillars of the European city of the future – environmental sustainability, social cohesion, viable economic base – a profound restructuring of the urban, social and economic system was needed. On the other hand, in order to take the accountability and quality of the policy-making process seriously, a profound change in the local political system and institutional setting was also required. In the context of a post-disaster city, such issues – common to all cities even in *normal* times – were posed in a particularly dramatic way, illuminating the role that the preconditions *of*, and the obstacle *to*, urban change play in actual processes of transition through crisis.

The impressive State mobilization that followed the earthquake, in the form of a wide array of emergency tools and interventions, funding initiatives, governance and management solutions, was supposed to respond to the compelling needs posed by the emergency while setting the scene for

the redevelopment of the urban system as a whole. In this context, a fairly intense phase of 'cognitive mobilization' involving a wealth of international, national and local actors was launched to enhance collective awareness regarding the need to give the city a project of change while putting under scrutiny the obstacles and preconditions of such a project.

Both the national government and the municipality engaged in processes were aimed at improving the reconstruction process. On the one side, the city restarted the path towards the adoption of a new structural plan and a strategic plan, finalized in 2012, while on the other the Italian Ministry for Territorial Cohesion commissioned three independent reports, addressing, respectively, the economic future of the city (Calafati *et al.*, 2012), its spatial development (Campos Venuti *et al.*, 2012) and the reconstruction's legal framework (Cacace *et al.*, 2012). Later on, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) was asked to support the Italian Government in 'designing a forward-looking strategy to re-launch the economy of the Abruzzo Region after the earthquake' (OECD, 2013). The outcomes of the related research and stakeholder engagement activities carried out by the OECD in partnership with the London School of Economics and the University of Groningen, were published in 2013 in the report *Policy Making after Disasters: Helping Regions Become Resilient – The Case of Post-Earthquake Abruzzo* (OECD, 2013).

All these processes and their outcomes were intended as cognitive tools that should have fostered further reflections, strategic prioritisation and operative choices of the public institutions that, on behalf of the national, regional and local communities, were leading the reconstruction effort. In this context, six years after the quake and with the reconstruction underway, social science doctoral students and post-doctoral researchers of the newly created Gran Sasso Science Institute – then led by Prof. Antonio Calafati – inquired into how the city that was actually being produced through physical, social and economic reconstruction interventions was keeping up with the promise to build a 'city of the future' (GSSI, 2015a).

The collective engaged in a plurality of research streams mobilizing a mix of quantitative and qualitative while promoting three open workshops engaging a diversity of stakeholders – inhabitants, NGOs and urban activists, local institutions, researchers – with the aim of both mapping bottom-up urban practices that were arising after the disaster, and discussing some emerging effects of the on-going reconstruction process. In the last forum, held in December 2015, the results of five preliminary research streams – respectively on mobility, walkability, strategic spatial planning, knowledge institutions, cultural events – were presented and discussed with local stakeholders and with Fabrizio Barca, former Minister of Territorial Cohesion and Chair of GSSI Scientific Committee (GSSI, 2015b). Subsequently, also based on the outcome of the discussion, research was restructured into a series of research streams that were presented and discussed at a workshop organized by the curators of this book at the Rotterdam Architecture Biennale in May 2016, with the participation of a panel of international

urban scholars and policy-makers. Three main working sections – *Strategies*, *Spatialities* and *Sociabilities* – comprising the seven streams – *Spatial Strategies and Reconstruction*, *The Knowledge City*, *Public Spaces*, *Walkability*, *Mobility*, *Cultural Events Economy* and *The Organized Civil Society* – were held with the aim of responding to three leading questions:

- What kind of future was imagined for L'Aquila after the quake?
- What kind of future is actually emerging?
- What input can be useful to better inform the shaping of this future?

The results of that workshop – the research contributions enriched by the discussion organized in the working sections together with additional keynote interventions – form the core of this book.

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