Luoghi Idea(li)
Commento di Charles Sabel (in lingua originale)

Reading the reports on the projects makes it clear, yet again, how important initiatives like Luoghi Ideali are. Let us just stipulate that democracies, even democracies more participatory than any we currently know, will need institutions to mediate between the needs and preferences arising in the lived experience of citizens, the formation of political agendas, and the articulation of judgments about leaders and their performance. Let us agree to call those institutions parties, and to agree further that, as a practical matter, parties with such functions no longer exist in the mass democracies. The late Peter Maier put this point unequivocally in his last book, *Ruling the Void*:

> The age of party democracy has passed. Although the parties themselves remain, they have become so disconnected from the wider society, and pursue a form of competition that is so lacking in meaning, that they no longer seem capable of sustaining democracy in its present form.

Maier sees the proximate cause of the decline of parties in a double desertion: voters and party members withdraw support even as the elites withdraw from democratic accountability and begin to use parties as vehicles for personal ambition. The underlying causes will be for the historians of the future to determine. What we can say now is that the loss of parties is especially grave for the left as the voice of the vulnerable because the vulnerable need politics in countless ways more than citizens who can defend their interests directly through markets. So Luoghi Ideali is confronting an especially severe breakdown of the party system, and of the left, but the problem is general, not just Italian.

The focus on local projects, carefully monitored, at the center of Luoghi Ideali seems, moreover, well suited to addressing the chicken-and-egg problem inherent in this kind of necessarily ambitious reform effort. To change a party it is necessary to go outside it, to engage new actors on their terms, or current actors in new ways; and if the goal is not simply the repeatedly discredited one of detecting some commonality of sentiment on which to build support for the coming election, then joint activity, joint efforts to realize some common goal, are certainly a legitimate and probably a privileged way of reshaping the interests and eventually some aspects of the identities of the party insiders and their new interlocutors on the outside. But to go outside in this sustained, project-oriented way, and to ensure that results achieved outside actually contribute to change within the party, it is necessary to have at least some support from the party—it is necessary, in other words, that the party in some minimal measure acquiesces in or encourages its own transformation. Although I will not try to document it, my strong impression from reading the project reports is that the local interventions are well calibrated to resolving this dilemma. On the one hand they typically require investigation of and sustained engagement with new

milieu and actors—ranging from administrative authorities to immigrants, shop owners or families—while, on the other, maintaining contact and sometimes gaining the active support or at least approval of those local or regional party organizations not currently immobilized by factional fighting.

But if projects of this kind are appealing and feasible in principle, how are they proving in practice? More exactly, given that the projects are at a very early stage and, even more important, that the goal of any review of this kind is to diagnose difficulties and suggest possibly remedies, what are the projects learning about the problems they are addressing? How could they learn more?

The answer so far, it seems to me, is that we—meaning external commentators like myself—simply don't know enough to respond to questions of that kind. The reports convey an utterly convincing sense of how hard it is to this kind of work in the absence of some upwelling of spontaneous support and in the presence of internal party squabbles and a general disaffection with politics. In recounting the struggles for modest financing, for official information, for cooperation with various actors the reports compel deep admiration for the dedication and ingenuity of participants of Luoghi Ideali.

But what the reports, at least as I read them (and, where available, the supporting material) do not do is describe, let alone attempt to explain, successes, failures, or—perhaps most important of all—puzzling or arresting findings that could be pointers for the re-orientation or development of current efforts. I will say now, and repeat in a moment, that in asking for more information—in most cases, very little more—I am adding to the already heavy burdens of participation. I do so only because it seems that in many cases, but with important exceptions, the projects are not making the best use of their own discoveries and achievements. Here, in no particular order and with no pretension to completeness, are some examples:

Sibari-Pollino: The aim here is to encourage the compatible and sustainable development of an area containing "emergent" archeological findings, other cultural riches, nature preserves and rich agriculture. We learn about the process by which the project proceeded, but not much about the actual alternatives under discussion, locally or more generally in Italy. At the very end of the report there is a surprising disclosure:

> Per altro verso un indubbio punto di forza è aver verificato, proprio con lo strumento delle audizioni, in particolare quelle di Civita, che in quel piccolo comune Arbereshe l"alleanza che il progetto persegue, quella tra agricoltura, cultura e borghi, s"è concretizzata ed è riuscita a garantire "la piena occupazione" ai propri abitanti. E dunque la prova provata che se attorno ad un"idea di base condivisa e che abbia in loco i presupposti "naturali" istituzioni, società civile ed impresa si alleano i risultati arrivano.

So we wonder just how this alliance is structured, what "natural" configuration of institutions, firms and civil society permits and facilitates it, and, most of all, how politics might contribute to shaping such conditions or otherwise encouraging such and alliance.

Rome (Municipio XII): The goal of the project is to improve differentiated re-cycling, guided by responses to an on-line questionnaire. The respondents to the questionnaire are predominantly "adulti, laureati, impiegati, donne, sposati configli." An outsider wonders: Is this who lives in the quarter? If so, will a project that works here work elsewhere? If not, is this project right for this quarter? And do on. The point is not that the project can be judged in the slightest on the basis of these results, but rather that it is hard to know what kind of project it is without saying something about them.

Cagliari –Villanova: The project focuses on establishing or re-enforcing social cohesion within the quarter, especially the ties between "old" and "new" inhabitants. The project was subject to the usual delays; in a sense it is just beginning. Nonetheless, a process of "mappatura" starting in April brought to light an arresting fact:

> "Va sottolineato che quanto emerge dal lavoro sulla percezione, consente una lettura del tutto parziale e non rappresentativa dell'economia sommersa (relativamente agli irregolari e al lavoro in nero), poiché il nostro campione è troppo irrilevante a livello statistico per poter dare un quadro solido e definitivo. Nondimeno, ciò che emerge ed è importante, è la presenza di un disallineamento tra il quadro dell'economia formale e quella reale a Villanova."

What's the relation, if any, between this disallineamento and the relation of inhabitants, old and new? Is this a source of conflict, or perhaps solidarity? If this seems like a central problem, what else can be said about it? If not, why not, and what does seem more pertinent? Again, it was manifestly difficult to get this far—I raise the additional questions because even these first results may hold clues to or frame a useful debate about crucial next steps.

Milano-Via Padova: This project too focuses on improving the quality of life and the social cohesion of a fragile quarter. An important point of contact between the project and the quarter are the storeowners and their association. A number of stores have agreed to have their saracinesche painted. This benefits them and the quarter; it is a sign of cooperation. We wonder—what are the merchants' other concerns? How else could the project, perhaps augmented by other participants, help them and the quarter?

Cesena: The focus of the project is improvement in the (already rich) local offering of welfare services, especially to the elderly and infants. The report is frank about difficulties, especially the underestimation of difficulties and the overestimation of

capacities. It includes a link to an interview with a very able social worker who is part of the living memory of the provision of services in the area. But neither the report not the interview—at least the portions that I listened to—stated what the unmet needs are, and how they might be addressed. Social services cry out for innovation, not just in Italy; Italian municipalities, especially in areas of which Cesena is a part, were decades ago famous for their innovations. My hunch, my wild hope is that if the problem can be formulated more clearly, by continuing the kind of investigations already under way, it will be possible garner more support both locally and nationally. Excuse me if that hope is no connected to reality.

An exceptional case is the "brownfield" recovery of the Isochimica plant in Avellino, where the report recounts succinctly the expropriation of the plant by the Commune di Avellino; the steps towards the participatory determination of a zone recovery plan (involving collaboration with the Parrocchia and a Comitato di cittadini per la bonifica dell"Isochimica and many further steps) aimed at making the site the baricenter of local, light industry, and mentions plans to recover insurance benefits for former workers of the plant. One wants to know more—to understand how a problem that festered for three decades could be resolved in a few weeks with the help of external experts; why the Commune embraced the plan; how the participatory planning exercise changed the party and the administration. But it seems like this kind of information will be forthcoming in due course.

Let me repeat, as promised, that I fully understand how hard it has been to get this far, and how out of touch with reality all this requests for further information and inquiry may seem. One thing at a time is a good rule of thumb. But the aim of these projects is to induce a process of incremental but continuous change within the party and within the groups with whom it interacts on the outside. From that perspective it seems obligatory to step back, even if just a bit, from current efforts to ask where things may be headed. But even if that long-term perspective seems like an unobtainable luxury, these examples are meant to underscore an urgent and immediate point: Unless you use each new discovery or relation to pose questions about what has been and could be done, it is very hard to have any confidence in decisions about what to do next.

We—we democrats, we leftists—desperately need a new kind of party. Your projects are pioneering the exploration of possibilities for building them. You are at the beginning of an extraordinarily demanding but promising task. The fact that your very first reports bring to light many surprises, and touch off an avalanche of questions, suggests that you are perhaps more successful, or closer to success than you must sometimes feel.