

Growing pains and a test case in Bologna

By Eric Sylvers

BOLOGNA

When the Argentine soccer coach Hector Cuper flew from Spain last month to report for his new job with the struggling Parma team, he landed at Marconi airport here and then drove an hour north to his new hometown.

A few days before, fans supporting the Liverpool, England-based Everton soccer team landed in Bologna and took buses south to Florence to see their team's game against Fiorentina.

The two commonplace events were not connected — but they were just part of the result of Bologna's attempt to package itself as a transportation hub serving a large swath of central Italy, from Florence to the southern outskirts of Milan. And central to that plan is the construction of 8,000 new housing units, along with an overhaul of the area's transportation system.

Bologna is not alone in Europe (or even in Italy) with plans to build its way into modernity — Milan is going through a makeover that is expected to accelerate now that the city has been chosen host of the 2015 Expo — but the breadth of Bologna's project stands out, especially considering that its population is just 375,000. Large public works projects in Italy often languish for years before dying, but, if Bologna is successful, it could make the city a model for other mid-sized European cities facing similar challenges.

Bologna's plans include investments of about €1.5 billion, or \$2.4 billion, over the next several years to expand the airport and to build a new train station, tram lines that will run partially underground, a suburban railway network and an elevated monorail connecting the train station to the airport. The work would be in tandem with another €5 billion being spent in and around Bologna on national infrastructure projects that include new highways and tracks for a high-speed train.

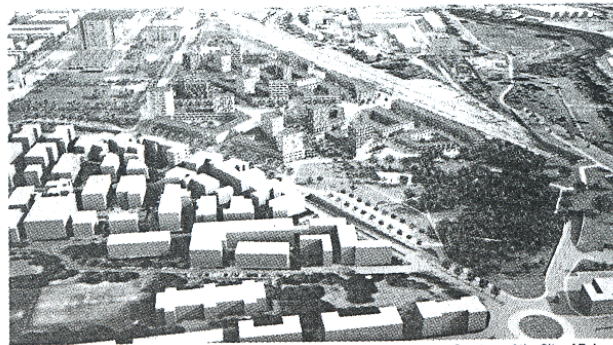
"The airport is the door to the world and can act as the motor for all of Bologna's other infrastructure projects from housing to public transportation," said Giuseppina Gualtieri, the chairwoman of the city's Marconi airport. "It's important that the airport expansion happens, all the rest will follow."

Part of "the rest" would be residential units among some new buildings for the University of Bologna's engineering department, which has outgrown its current quarters in the city center. If all the final approvals are given, apartment buildings, projects valued at about €1.2 billion, will be constructed in three areas. Private investors, with some contributions from the city, are behind the construction.

The engineering buildings and many of the planned residential units will be in a new neighborhood called Bertalia-Lazzaretto, which will have the only intermediate stop on the monorail planned to connect the train station to the airport. Some of the housing and most of the university construction is



Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times



Courtesy of the City of Bologna

The city of Bologna, above, is planning to package itself as a transportation hub for a large part of central Italy. The plan includes 8,000 new housing units, some of which are shown in the architect's model, left.

scheduled to be finished in five years. Site preparation work already has begun at the former wholesale fruit market behind the train station, another area that will be used for new residential buildings.

"We did some demographic projections and other studies and the simulations made us think that, in the next 15 years, Bologna is going to need 20,000 more inhabitants," said Francesco Evangelisti, head of the city's urban planning department. "That is based on the actual growth of families already here and of new families that will move here. The decision to grow is, of course, a demographic choice the city has taken to increase its economic base. Companies around Bologna have a growing need for workers."

In a country where moving any kind of large project through planning to approval and then completion is, at best, arduous, there are few assurances that all the projects will ever be completed, but Mayor Sergio Cofferati dismissed any suggestion that some plans may stay just that.

"What's important is that the work begins on these projects before I leave office next year and we'll be able to do that," Cofferati said in an interview in his office, which overlooks the city's central square and 14th century San Petronius Church, with its unfinished façade.

The church is evidence that getting big construction done in Bologna has been an issue for 600 years or more. The story goes that the Vatican canceled the financing for San Petronius when the pope realized it would be larger than Saint Peter's in Rome.

Locals already have mobilized against the proposed monorail, known here by the English term "people mover," which they say is emblematic of an uncoordinated approach to Bologna's infrastructure needs. The critics contend that the proposed projects would not serve enough people, would threaten historic areas of the city and would be too expensive to operate.

"Bologna has the advantage that it is in the middle of Italy and from here you can easily get to everywhere in the country, but we need to be able to move in the city as well," said Daniele Corticelli, a local councilman and the chairman of a group called Il Metro che Vorrei, which translates to "the metro that I would like." The group favors a three-line subway system that it says would cost €1.8 billion and take six years to build.

"We have presented a homogenous proposal and now we need a referendum to see how to move forward because these are projects that last years and go well beyond the tenure of one mayor," said Corticelli.

A referendum may do little to solve the issue though. In February, a majority voting in a nonbinding referendum chose to block a €560 million project to build three tram lines in central Florence, but local officials said they would go ahead with the project anyway, and local groups said they would continue to fight.

Dante Benini, who was named the top architect in Italy last year by a magazine in Rome called *Real Estate*, said Italians must accept that their cities will change but that does not mean Bologna, Florence or anywhere else has to lose its character and links to the past.

"People ask for speed and comfort, but they don't want change," Benini said in an interview in his Milan office. "It is absolutely necessary to invest in good public transportation and accept change."

Weekly highlights from
Raising the roof
on iht.com

Glamour and gulps
at big show in Madrid

Beyond the usual reports on hot markets and glamorous new developments, the *Salón Inmobiliario Internacional de Madrid*, or SIMA, is expected to focus this week on whether the property market is in the midst of a real disaster.

Raising the Roof, the IHT's properties blog, is covering the event, which is promoted as the largest real estate exhibition in the world and is marking its 10th anniversary.

More than 150,000 visitors are expected and about 800 exhibitors are registered to fill the event's six pavilions through Saturday.

A 'failure' at retirement
with an island to improve

At 69, Keith Stewart, the developer, says he is a "miserable failure" at retirement.

Born in Britain and raised in Zimbabwe, Stewart first made his fortune in the United States, building a company that specialized in automated paper-handling devices for copy machines. He built luxury resorts in Mallorca and Zimbabwe before developing his signature project, Pezula, the development along South Africa's Garden Route that includes private homes, fractional ownerships, hotel and golf operations and a private aviation business.

With Pezula entering its final phase, Stewart says he is ready to make his next move. In a wide-ranging e-mail interview with Raising the Roof, he talks about the market, new hot spots and his coming challenges, including his recent purchase of a private island in the Seychelles, an "incredible, pristine, untouched, unspoiled part of the world" that had little or no development during 30-odd years of dictatorship that ended nearly a decade ago. "And now it's opened up and they're doing it very, very well," he said. "It's very limited in terms of what can be developed and they are even limiting in terms of the number of tourists they want to attract there."

Stewart also talks about his plans to expand the Pezula brand in southern Africa and the Indian Ocean region.

— Kevin Brass

Next week in Properties

Real estate experts:
What's going to happen next?