

New urban decentralization: space and sensoriality.

The “sensory heritage” as a perceptual and community-based approach for reading the postmetropolitan landscape

LA NUEVA DESCENTRALIZACIÓN URBANA; ESPACIO Y SENSORIALIDAD. LA "HERENCIA SENSORIAL" COMO APROXIMACIÓN COMUNITARIA PARA LA LECTURA DEL PAISAJE POSTMETROPOLITANO

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Introduction

The twentieth century, that Hobsbawm defined as “the short century” (Hobsbawm, 1995), was characterized by a high incidence of political, economic and social events, that determined the progressive identification of society with the immediate present, to the detriment of the past and memory mechanisms. This led to the establishment of a sort of “permanent present”, which influenced the way of considering and organizing the places of social life: the cities.

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One of the elements having had the highest impact on the twentieth century approach to the city has to be found in the close relationship that developed between space management and ideology. For Western society, this is, indeed, a well-known issue from its very origins: the relationship between “the system of beliefs and opinions that represent a particular social group”, namely ideology, and the consequent shape of the space, is a fact that has accompanied the birth of the city itself. It is precisely in the light of this gap that the Greek *pòlis* was born, namely in the very moment when «rationality identifies itself with politics» (Vegetti, 1977: 25). More specifically, the management of public affairs and space (politics), becomes expression of an ideology (*lògos*).

The evolution of the city during the last century led to a condition of growing complexity, where finding new proper tools for interpreting and managing urban transformations is getting increasingly hard. Therefore the issue of urban decentralization, as a possible solution to face the alienation of contemporary metropolitan areas through processes of participation and social cohesion, is nowadays again particularly relevant both in Italy and internationally. Italy has recently launched a major reform (Law n. 56/2014) in the field of metropolitan areas regulation, calling for public attention to the issue. The approach presented in this paper, based on the concept of multisensoriality as a key element for the urban landscape reading, represents a complementary methodology running parallel to the traditional tools.

Ideology and shape of the city in the twentieth century

Compared to the previous centuries, the twentieth century was the one in which a radicalization of the phenomenon of the affection of the urban shape by ideologies occurred, due to the emergence of severely violent and despotic ideologies. In numerous cases, ideology was reflected in the way of reinterpreting the city of the past, up to distorting its organization: it is the case of the almost total re-planning of Berlin suggested by Speer, or of the reconstruction of the city center of Dresden in the Sixties, realized in international style in order for the Khrushchev government to be able to show off greater openness. In other cases, ideology led to the founding of the cities from scratch, such as the fascist ones of Aprilia, Littoria, Pomezia, Pontinia, Sabaudia, or on the opposite ideological position the one of Nowa Huta in Poland, built a few years before the death of Stalin (Aman, 1992; De Magistris, 1997).

The fall of the Berlin Wall represented, even symbolically, the end of the totalitarian ideology and the consecration of the liberal-democratic model. Born in opposition to the former, the liberal-democratic model identifies individual freedom as the highest value to be protected. Taking for granted its well-known positive political and social effects, it is interesting to examine some fall-outs, even negative, that the affirmation of this ideology has produced.

One of these is precisely linked to space management: the unyielding vision that characterized the totalitarian models crumbles into a series of individual points of view, which in fact hand over the problem of the construction of the city to private initiative. The liberal city, therefore, was born in the light of this aporia, outcome of its ideology: on the one hand, there is an attempt to protect the free individual initiative, on the other hand it is necessary to find the high-level control structure that can mediate between the individual initiative and the interests of society. From the years of reconstruction onwards, all European countries experienced the parallel emergence of the private property speculation together with the proliferation of a restriction scheme, prescriptive at first and then exigential and performative, as an extreme attempt to stem individual initiative. A comparison between public and private has essentially highlighted the inadequacy of resources of local governments, leading to an uncontrolled development of the urban shape.

Ideology and shape of the contemporary city

What stands out as the salient feature of the contemporary city can be summed up in the concept of “crisis of identity”. The mode of production of the city, breaking into a series of individual actions, does not allow to interpret the urban landscape as the product of a collective social vision. The phenomenon is exacerbated by the emergence of a multicultural situation, which puts in direct contact groups of individuals belonging to different cultural models.

The outcome concerns first and foremost the loss of effectiveness of the instruments traditionally used to guide the development of the city. If the shape of the space originates from a chaotic series of uncoordinated and unpredictable actions, then the same idea of urban project is challenged. This fact does not necessarily represent a problem: for some authors, in this situation the possibilities increase and new worth-discovering opportunities for growth

are constantly generated. In 1966, Venturi (1996:16) was already in favor of this position, stating «I am for messy vitality over obvious unity». Recently, Koolhaas (1995:124) has pointed out that «identity conceived as this form of sharing the past is a losing proposition». The new city has to be supported through the concept of “bigness”, that is the place of the chaotic growth of society and its space, of the constant destruction aiming at renovation. Accordingly, what comes out is the idea of accepting the physical and social scenario, in which to explore new opportunities that have nothing to do with the past models.

These initial findings cannot be considered exhaustive. In 1973 Pasolini, in a short film called *Pasolini e la forma della città*, focuses attention upon the relationship between liberal-democratic society and ideology. His conclusion leads to note that, after the one of the great totalitarian regimes, a new ideology has become prominent: that of the consumer society. This is a more subtle ideology, which does not bind to a specific place, but that extends to influence the shape of many international cities: Yadz in Persia, Al Mukalla in Aden, Sana’a in Yemen, Bhagaton in Nepal, Orte in Italy. Experiences having in common the progressive destruction of the “past-minute” through a unique liberal industrialism that is increasingly spreading.

Despite the situation having further changed, bringing the reflection upon the city back to ideology marks a fundamental step. The city of today is not the consequence of the “end of ideology”, but the result of a different ideology, which cannot be achieved within the unitary structures of the state. Postmodern ideology is a reflection of postmodern, fragmented into the complex scenarios of multicultural societies, divided into disjointed and disorganized spaces. Giving up the understanding of these factors means accepting the very end of the Architecture discipline, devolving upon chaos the solution of the problems of the organization of space. Lyotard (1999) has been able to understand this situation with particular clarity. On the one hand it is necessary to acknowledge the end of the concept of the modern city and metropolis, in favor of a system of “zones” with no shape and no specific organization. The urban scene is set up as a sort of “huge megalopolis”, in which there is no center or periphery, where the subject has no references and is dispersed in a no man’s land: «inhabiting the area means giving up the big national identity of the modern era». On the other hand, however, the sense of living is still a problem. If the postmodern man has lost his identity, if society is nothing more than «a transhumant society that goes for a walk in the area», the ques-

tion that gives rise to the discipline of architecture as a whole never ceases to be present: «What is it to be built for this humanity? What does humanity want? This is the real problem of today and tomorrow architects».

Lyotard's thesis approaches the reflection to the contemporary scenario: the decline of the metropolis is now a central theme of the debate. The emergence of the concept of "postmetropolis", introduced more than a decade ago by Soja, goes precisely in the direction suggested by the French philosopher. On the one hand, the reflection starts from the ineffectiveness of the traditional instruments to interpret the ongoing changes; on the other hand, it focuses upon the strategies that allow to establish a relationship with this scenario. The traditional distinctions on which to base an understanding of urban space having collapsed, the management of complex systems of the post-metropolitan areas must start from the consideration of the "in-between spaces", namely «the new emerging geographies of power between the national and the global and the national and local scales». Soja's proposal (2000: 205)¹ is based on the recognition of a new regionalism, anchored to a dynamic system of "decentralization and re-centralization", not retracing the static institutional divisions of the territory, but reinterpreting them in the light of more complex categories. This is the only possible way to redefine the idea of "democracy and citizenship" and "identity" in the contemporary global context.

Moreover, a significant position is the one proposed by Gregotti (2001:5) in *Architettura e postmetropoli*. Alienating himself from the positions that arise from the «myth of chaos, instability as value, acceleration, subversive fiction and its frantic drift», and excluding concepts now considered ineffective, such as those of "community", "place", "identity", the architect proposes to place the "disciplinary identity of architecture and urban design" at the center of reflection. «It is necessary to believe strongly in the architecture of the city and the citizens, speaking with the works of what only architecture can say about the issue of the city» (*ibid.*:148).

Urban decentralization and sensoriality

Gregotti's reflection brings the problem back to an understanding of the city within a concrete horizon, based on the direct relationship between citizen

1 See also: SOJA, E (2010), *Seeking spatial justice*, university of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis

and lived space. How to cope with the incessant changes of urban landscapes? How to find the tools that can include and anticipate their dynamics? «The most obvious answer is the one we live every day, the direct correspondence in the representation of the shape of the city precisely to those non-values that are considered definitive, motionless, despite the universal praise of ceaseless change mistaken for civic development» (*ibid.*). If the space of the city should be interpreted as lived space, then it is essential to develop strategies that can identify, within complex scenarios, urban perimeters of truly human scale. What is the size of the space considered as living space? Which elements does the subject actually have a relationship with? The idea of a division of the city based upon specific and effective criteria, which could lead to an understanding of the territory proves to be current again.

In *Life and Death of Great American cities*, Jacobs stressed the importance of the recovery of the “human scale”, and of the role of the road (the Maiden Lane in San Francisco), the neighborhood and community centers. The same concept of “clusters”, theorized by Smithson and the Team X between the Fifties and Sixties, refers to the search for a spatial dimension suitable for the development of a local community and civic engagement (Smithson, P; Smithson, A, 1957). It was exactly the attempt to find a proper dimension to read the urban landscape, in order to foster an “identification” with the places of the city, to have been the basis for the emergence of the concept of urban decentralization.

The organization of the major European cities in areas of decentralization, which began in the Sixties, borrowing from the studies conducted mainly in the USA and UK, however, soon resulted in a mere division of services and infrastructures for citizens. It was a trivialization of the original concept having been intensifying up to the present, in which the debate about the administrative organization of cities has often become secondary. The dominance of a quantitative approach to detect lived spaces has been spreading to the detriment of a qualitative understanding of local peculiarities.

On the contrary, we believe that a new understanding of urban space is now required. In a scenario where traditional instruments seem to have lost their effectiveness, the recovery of the notion of sensoriality could play a crucial role: the relationship between man and environment is an issue that is first experienced through the emotional–perceptual data, triggered by the sensorial act, rather than through the quantitative and numerical detection of

territory. As Merleau-Ponty (1958: 61) states: «sense experience is that vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life. It is to it that the perceived object and the perceiving subject owe their thickness». Despite affirming that we live in a historical reality, whose boundaries are more and more elusive, it is undeniable that our lives and our actions take place in a defined space, with which we can relate thanks to the perception of its dimension, its sounds, its smells and its colors.

If the presence in urban areas of services and facilities on which the citizens can base their sense of belonging is right, then it is even more imperative for the citizens to establish a contact and find guidance beginning from the sensory data that the environment offers. The contemporary disconnection between sensitive data and real life is one of the most demeaning traits of Western culture, the reason why the spaces where we live are becoming more and more aseptic, sensitivity is emptied of meaning, communication takes place within an increasingly stereotyped context.

Arguably, our proposal focuses on putting in the spotlight the issue of multisensoriality as a key to interpret the urban context, with the belief that the reading arising from this approach can give a significant contribution to the many already existing tools of spatial analysis. The elements of the city that are referred to are represented by that “sensory heritage” surrounding us, often forgotten or not considered, which plays an important role in understanding the place and space of our existence. The sound of the wind in the trees, the confusion of the boys playing in the gardens of the schools, the jumble of sounds and smells of the local markets, the rustle of leaves along the tree-lined streets, the smell of rain, the roar of the water of fountains. In order to understand the forms that the relationship between the citizen and the environment takes, these episodes cannot be ignored but should instead become one of the cornerstones of the new reorganization of the city.

Urban decentralization in Milan

The origins of decentralization in Milan are very distant and intimately related to its morphological structure. Since the late nineteenth century and then with the twentieth-century urban planning, the urban configuration based on radiocentric axes of expansion has resulted in a sprawling expansion up to the annexation of suburban independent villages. The strong identi-

ty-making characteristic of these places continues today, as their peculiar topography demonstrates. The relationship between center and periphery has been dominating since the origins of the modern city. From the second post-war onwards this congenital spatial plant, together with the policies of urban expansion based on the creation of satellite districts and the consequent increase in the land-rents, resulted in heavy social effects, with the expulsion from the center of the poorest sectors of the population. It is precisely in the years of reconstruction that spontaneous popular movements calling for greater civic participation develop in the suburbs (Boatti, 2007; Romano, 2013).

In 1945, there are the so-called “Comitati di liberazione rionale”, then “Consulte popolari”, that at the end of World War II had already begun to play an important role in assisting citizens. In the early Sixties, while large social housing estates are built in the outskirts of cities, there is the birth of the so called “Comitati di quartiere”, namely spontaneous movements of citizens with the goal of bringing the decision-making centers of urban policy in the neighborhoods, as well as encouraging new participation (Dragone, 1995; Lucchini and Schiaffonati, 1969). The reasoning behind it, paraphrasing Rousseau in *The Social Contract*, is to ensure that the sovereignty of the citizens is not confined to the mere exercise of the right to vote. The debate culminates in 1976 with the launch of the Law “Gui” and with the establishment of so-called “Circoscrizioni”: in Milan 24 were formed, later reduced to 20, each one with a council and a president directly elected by local residents. In the Nineties, as a result of profound national reforms due to increasing public spending, the number of areas of decentralization was drastically reduced from 20 to 9. From maximum expression of civic participation, decentralization thus transformed into a mere instrument of service delivery to citizens.

In the “Piano di Governo del Territorio” of 2012 the municipality of Milan introduced an original reading instrument of the urban landscape drawing attention to the issue of identity. 88 “Nuclei di Identità Locale” (NIL) are identified, homogenous neighborhoods both from the functional point of view and the density of services and infrastructures one. A tool, on paper, extremely valuable to read the urban shape and, ultimately, to support a reorganization of urban decentralization. However, if more attention is paid to this tool, it becomes clear that this is primarily a survey of existing services.

It would now be necessary for the city of Milan to focus upon the concepts of “identity” and “perception of places”, in order to allow for a consis-

tent administrative reorganization and a balanced future development. The mistake that should not be made is that of falling into a sort of ideological approach. As Jacobs warned: «the point, to repeat, is to work *with* the city» (Jacobs, 1957:182; 1961). Divisions and top-down logics are to be avoided, favoring instead a proper organization of the physical space pursuant to the perception of the citizens.

Research on these issues has resulted in a more operational phase. An attempt of a multi-sensorial analysis of the area of Porta Romana, in the south-east of Milan has in fact begun. This is an area currently divided into several areas of decentralization, which needs to be radically rethought. The conducted research is based upon a morphological, evolutionary and historical reading of the urban structure, together with the consideration of “sensory heritage” of the area. The abstract reading, proposed through the specified tools, captures only a part of the real data: urban parks are not a mere urban standard, but social and sensory polarities. The bus stops are places of encounter and exchange, local markets symbols of collective life that strongly influence the perceptive character of the space of the city.

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