

The Transformation of the Urban Habitat

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1. Urban Spaces

We can imagine, we can even partake in, an experience and an exercise : the experience of three different urban spaces; the exercise being the attempt to comprehend their fundamental characteristics. Of the medieval town where a community lives and is represented, for example, perceiving itself as limited, integrated, and apart, defended from the world around it; my favourite example is Piazza del Campo, in Siena, a city which I have studied for some time, and for which I have prepared an urban study and a series of town planning schemes. Or the experience of the space which represents the ambition, to borrow a beautiful expression from Leonardo Benevolo (Benevolo, 1991), "to capture the infinite": the ambition of a culture and of a society which thinks itself capable of dominating nature physically and visually; my favourite example, following the suggestion of the same Benevolo, is Kassel. Or even the experience of the "mercantile road", those long road stretches in the "diffuse city", seemingly unstructured, a 'non-place' along which alternate parking lots, display rooms, and covered and open-air shopping, without any apparent structure or order; my favourite examples are a number of roads north of Milan and in Veneto, or the radial roads which leave Kortrijk, a Belgian town, for which I have made an urban study and some town planning schemes.

These spaces are substantially different from each other, not just in their being different concepts of a town, but in that the relationship between the population, its activities and its territory (i.e. different spatialities), varies considerably - sometimes in more refined ways, sometimes in more direct. Other examples could certainly be placed amongst them, but not many. Aligned along the time axis, they highlight for us, in a very schematic way, the history of the living space: dominated in the first example by its concentration, by its continuity, by its exclusion of the outside world, by its clear delimitation between that which is 'inside' and that which is 'outside', but with intermediary elements ever-present between one and the other: the portico, the entrance hall, the courtyard, the covered road, and the roof garden; by the differences in size and scale of the building elements to the open-air spaces which take on a clear and evident meaning in the collective imagination. Out of scale dimensions are reserved for large constructions such as the cathedral, the conventual church, the hospital, the Piazza del Campo, and only for them because only they represent social activities and practices in which the entire collectivity is identified; all the rest have a different size and smaller scale, because, independent of wealth and prestige, they represent activities and practices to which single individuals or specific groups are identified. The disposition of the activities and their locations according to a

sequence through time or practical layout build up, in this first example, an easily-seen 'narrative' of the urban space.

The last type of space which I have brought to your attention, that of the 'mercantile road', or more generally speaking, the space of the 'diffuse city', is, on the contrary, characterised by its discontinuity, by its dispersion, by its non-evident delimitation and separation between the closed and open spaces, by the areas built on and those not - by the almost total absence of intermediary elements between the inside and the outside - by the continuous variation of the size and scale of the building elements - by the absence of the narrative - by the layout of the various activities within the space according to rules which are continuously changing - by their 'gaining attention' through recourse to instruments of direct visual communication, rather than to the implicit and well-known rules of layout and composition of the urban space.

Each of these examples, if examined with care through appropriate technical analyses, could of course bring about a reflection of a different type, but above all raise some questions: on the reasons for the change in our sensitivity to the physical make-up of the living space, on the images which we fill it with and those which we refer to it by, or on the process of selective accumulation through which the living space which surrounds us is formed and slowly modified.

2. Transformation of the City

All of this seems to me to be important to do today because it is now an established conviction that the physical scenario of the European city has been undergoing for some time a radical transformation. It is difficult to say in 'concise' terms precisely how this transformation is happening. It is evoked by resorting to a 'vague' language and discussion format. We have learned a lot about this recent transformation from not only studies done by geographers, economists, sociologists, and town planners, but from the cinema and from literature as well.

If we were able to say of what exactly this transformation consists, we would also be able to say when it began; we would perhaps be able to arrange its various contributing factors in a logical and chronological order, and to connect it to other characteristics which connote the social and economic life of our cities and of our countries. But, it is not like this.

The first difficulty which the observant researcher encounters is that of the description - a difficulty which increases each time someone proposes a 'rough description' from which to extract the 'vague concepts' with which he hopes to illuminate the 'latest state of things'.

Despite this, we can see that a series of new terms have been adopted by our common language; terms which are often resorted to in an indiscriminate way, terms which become quickly exhausted, and are then substituted as often as not with other terminology just as weak. This points out perhaps the profound difficulty inherent in conceptual ordering. However, if we follow for a moment this superficiality, the vocabulary, this discursive technique, we see that some differing, though perhaps complementary, approaches to the whole question may be singled out from them.

At one extreme, I have found the study programme of those who are studying the transformations of the 'urban system'. One example of such is a series of studies done on the 'Territorial Diffusion of Development', conducted by a group led by Giorgio Fuà, and collected together by Giuseppe Dematteis (Dematteis, 1992). Examples, though, more relevant to other European countries, are studies made at the end of the 80's by A.J. Fielding (Fielding, 1982, 1989) and by A.G. Champion (Champion, 1989), and, even earlier still, those by N.J.L. Berry (Berry, 1976) for the United States. At the other extreme, though, I have found the line of research followed by academics who observe aboveall the transformations of the 'living space' - something about which much is said and often, but for which there perhaps remains to date no systematic and sufficiently broadly-based research - no texts to which to make safe reference.

Of the transformations taking place in Western economies and societies, these two approaches, like the others which we will look at in the following, tend to assimilate aspects, useless to say, quite different by nature, even if these themselves are broadly overlapping and interrelated. They do, however, employ types of language and investigative methods somewhat different - the first an intensive use of descriptive statistics, and the second an intensive use of some modern derivatives of morphological analysis. The first approach fixes its attention on the demographic indicators relevant to the various activity-functions. The second, on the other hand, focusses on how the ground itself is utilised, the open spaces and types of buildings, how these aggregate, juxtapose, and combine. Counter-urbanization, de-urbanization, decline, de-industrialization, and deconcentration have become some of the new words of the first approach, while the second has adopted, in an analogous way, the vaguer vocabulary of words like abandonment, heterogeneity, fragment, internal periphery, settlement principle, environmental framework, and countryside. Order, harmony, and the rules of the scientific cosmos try to govern the language of the first approach, while 'the language of chaos', to use the beautiful expression of Gianfranco Folena (Folena, 1991), is more typical of the second.

I am always led to believe that people know what they are saying; that they think about the words they use rather than selecting them at random from a dictionary; that if the vocabulary of the observers changes suddenly, it is because something has happened in the world being observed.

The first approach tends to reconstruct a geography and history of the city which broadly overlaps the geography and history of its development. In a territory and in a history like those of our country, in which the city was "the only principle along which the thirty centuries of Italian history can be reduced to a clear and unbroken narrative" (Cattaneo, 1858, 7), the first approach recognises today's large metropolitan areas with its dense or widely-spread communication networks, the poles of the metropolises and the secondaries which integrate with them or are integrating, the polycentric metropolitan areas, and the isolated cities. In all of this there is represented not only "the impact of the city on the countryside", but perhaps also the contrary. On the much-amplified scale of the continent, this may meet "The Global City" of Saskia Sassen (Sassen, 1991), and on a smaller scale it encounters the refusal to integrate of the new localism. In an analogous way, this sub-divides the urban history of our country into three principle phases: that of the development by 'districts' of the proto-industrialisation and of the first industrialisation of the XIX century; that of the polarised concentration, which, starting at the end of the last

century, reached its peak between 1954 and 1964; and that of the subsequent phase of counter-urbanization. The first approach makes the connection between these three phases to the change in the relationships between the major sectors of activity, and to the change in the organisational and dispositional logic of each.

The second approach on the other hand asks questions on the changes which have occurred, against various scales, in the form of settlements - on the concrete ways in which whole parts of territories have been built over and transformed, occupied by new industries, by new building projects, and by new infrastructures. It raises questions on the dimensions and configurations of these developments - on the ways in which the new industries aggregate or attract each other, rather than being intentionally combined and 'composed', creating original situations which require original 'names'. It raises questions on the relationships which the new developments establish with the geomorphological and hydrological assets of the territory, with the open space, with the agricultural or forested land, with the market garden, the domestic garden, the road, and the square. In the attempt to reconstruct a topography of the living space, this second approach tries to draw a relationship between all of this and the changes seen in the technology, social practices, lifestyles, and identity of the individual and collective subjects.

The 'physical city' becomes an important element in the studies of the change in social relationships; at least for those studies conducted from a 'choice restraint' perspective, according to which, to understand the logic of the social relationship network, one must assume that the individuals choose "within socially-structured alternatives" (Tosi, 1991, 282). Sociological research has amply demonstrated the importance of the local and territorial considerations in this.

The study of the changes in lifestyles and in social practices creates a third method of describing the 'transformation of the urban habitat' in Europe. Examples of this are the various Social Surveys, such as that of the IRER for Lombardy and the work within it done by Antonio Tosi and Guido Martinotti (Martinotti, 1991).

In similar ways, the studies of the changes in social identity, in particular in the changes in the *élite* class, of their structure and distribution over the land, of their strategy for self-recognition and assertion of authority, is perhaps another way, albeit less practical, of describing 'the transformation of the urban habitat' in Europe; transformations which, in large measure, had been demonstrated and even encouraged by a society which had been changing itself with an unforeseen vitality and from outside the magisterial canons of the 'traditional' *élite* class.

It is certainly possible to describe the same transformations by putting the emphasis on the process of continuous redefinition, restructure, and relocation of the production and service facilities. An example is the recent collection of studies by various European academics compiled by Gioacchino Garofoli (Garofoli, 1992); studies in which the development "from below" is displayed by an *élite* class in the non central regions and areas, based on the small enterprise and on the use of local resources, which is the opposite of those "from above" which give a planned record of the large urban centres and metropolises, of their leading groups, and of the large firms, public or private, which operate in relatively advanced sectors, in part foreign to the local culture.

The descriptions of the transformations of the urban habitat are laid out, or at least it seems to me, in a pattern of united and mutually supporting plans - much like

a geological stratification. When looking for a system of ordering that intends only to regulate rather than be hierarchical, alongside the description of the the urban system changes, I find that of the processes of redistribution of the production activities - with this being closely associated to that of the changes in the élites, and united to that of the description of the change in social practices. Finally, there is the description of the change in the physical structure - of the "living space". I could also invent alternative systems of ordering - no doubt, someone will. I could, aboveall, multiply the stata - insert the political changes, for example, between the descriptions of the changes in social practices and the descriptions of the changes in the élites. I could put the political changes at the top or at the bottom of my ordering, intersecting them with others. This would raise fresh questions: each of the descriptions which I have made reference to contains, incorporated in their instruments of analysis, in their selecting observational tools, such a quantity of linguistic conventions, of interpretive hypotheses, that they must put strong doubts on whether we are in fact dealing simply with descriptions.

3. Dispersion

It is difficult, for instance, to say in irrefutable terms whether the urban world in Europe, or even only in Italy, or for that matter only in the Padana Plain, is more 'dispersed' today compared to how it was twenty years ago, and by how much. It is difficult because to measure the dispersion, its various dimensions, and its variations through time, implies that a consensus be reached on a definition of the operative terminology. The recent attempts by A.C. Nelson (Nelson, 1992) to provide a definition of 'Ex-urbia' do not seem to be any more convincing than those by C. Spector in the middle of the 50's, or those subsequent to them. But it is just as difficult to believe that the frequency with which the term 'dispersion', and those terms associated with it, to which those who are studying the contemporary urban habitat of today resort in their discussions, should be a problem which concerns only psychoanalysis.

The main difficulties concern the point from which it is correct to observe the 'physical city', for the observer who has done the morphological analyses in their various derivatives. He who is handling the data furnished by the various annual statistics, provided they are not used in a way which is too figurative or metaphorical, is always able to resort to the diverse methods available for the analysis of the dispersion and concentration suggested by the descriptive statistics.

He who is observing, on the other hand, the materiality of the 'diffuse city' territory, for now it seems, is not able to do other than demonstrate it ostensibly by means of cartographic or photographic representations, and to speak of it using categorical devices which inevitably take on allusive connotations, albeit striking.

In these ways, resorting to a variety of imagery, he manages to distinguish between differing types of situations: he establishes that, in 'appearance', the Lunigiana, as an area of the dispersion, is different to the plain between Mestre, Treviso, and Padova, other areas of the dispersion - as it is to Brianza, the mineral deposit regions of Limburgo, or the Adriatic Coast. No sooner though than he has resorted to maps of various types, no sooner than he has displayed photography taken of land which appears to be the most representative of each of these areas, does he

begin to see that a Veneto 'mercantile road' starts to look so much like its Belgian counterpart that he is not able to distinguish them - that a subdivision of land at Curno cannot be distinguished from its equivalent in the Belluna Valley - that the Brianza villa is copied, against the wishes and aspirations of its owner, in thousands of examples spread over the continent.

To account for this apparent paradox, for a phenomena which pervades the whole continent, for the identifiable differences on the scale of a vast area, to which is accumulated the photographs and zenithal maps, and of a homogeneity which manifests itself on the scale of the single urban objects and their aggregation, the observer of the physical city habitually turns immediately to history; to a history which protects its protagonists (Wim Wenders, 1992), giving them legitimacy, articulating their emphasis and importance, 'creating a morality'.

The ineffable landscape of the dispersion appears comprehensible to him, even if difficult to describe, when placed against the background of the history of the territory, of its slow colonisation and modification through the ages, of its progressively becoming a "palimpsest", or put against the background of the history of building type, of the 'villa', for example, of its slides, of its 'reductions'.

In the territory he sees an inertia capable of 'structuring', of giving a geometric plot, semantics, and possible narrative, to the multiplicity of the new. This manifests itself in the form of an accumulation of persistence and permanence, as the analyses of Alain Léveill  demonstrate for the Geneva area: of ground subdivisions, of routes of irrigation ditches, roads, walls, treelines. Works in which once a 'project' was represented, and which now restrict the field of individual and collective options in more or less unavoidable ways. To overcome this inertia is not altogether impossible, but often costs such an effort that it hardly seems justifiable.

In an analogous way, the society which inhabits this territory becomes a depository of an accumulation of images in which its visions of the world and its desires are reflected and through which it can continually identify itself. The landscape of the dispersion is not only the fruit of spontaneity, of an urbanism without urbanists; on the contrary, it is also an outlet of a 'digestion' of identifiable planned undertakings in ideal-typical form as important references to the collective imagination.

However, it is precisely the observation of the history of the dispersion territory which allows us to grasp the profound ambiguity of the phenomena. Seen from 'the outside', from that which once was the countryside, it often presents itself in the form of a densification - another terminology which would necessitate accurate operational definitions - of the filling up of spaces which are 'between' the things. Viewed along the course of time, dispersion and densification appear to follow each other, signalling successive phases of a long process of growth and development. To a synchronous observation as well, some areas appear to be affected by processes of dispersion, others by contrary processes.

It is not said that the dispersion areas continue to expand to ever greater territories. The next decades may be referred to as the swelling of the broader networks, by the increase in value of land allotments, of the utilization of the fixed capital already established. The subdivisions and the small work stations which have invaded the countryside in recent years could be the 'pioneers' of the construction of

a new city, certainly different to that of the previous century, and to that of the first half of this century.

4. Conclusion

Just as the large urban utilities which came out of the city consolidated in the XIX century, the hospitals, the prisons, the barracks, the gasometers, the abattoirs, the council housing suburbs, were often the pioneers of the periphery, the new commercial centres, the industrial zones, the 'mercantile roads', and the allotment subdivisions of the widespread city, could be the pioneers of a different future city.

This suggests the idea of trying to collate possible relationships between the descriptions of the economic and social growth and development in some phases and the morphological characteristics of the phases of dispersion and of densification - a terrain onto which it is rather difficult to venture today with well-founded hypotheses.

Nevertheless, this is perhaps one of the few paths which will not reduce every aspect of the transformations which surround us to the singular presence of the automobile, or to an ineffable consequence of singularity, of 'haecceities' - to a spontaneity, certainly undervalued in the past, but rather improbable measured up to those which are being proposed to us today.

In this it is important to study the dispersion situations which have a long history, such as the Belgian 'banlieu verte', the French and Genevan 'pavillonaire', the German suburban districts, and the situations forming in each of the European countries in more recent times.

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