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Discussion Forums about the city

Images, texts and representation at an urban scale

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The main topic of this research is the image of contemporary cities (intended in a wide sense and so including not only pictures but also comments, plans, schemes, patterns and proposals) posted in the web communities. The concepts and the ideas diffused by the web have already been faced quite in depth by sociology, psychology, media and communication experts but it is a relatively new topic in urban research. The great importance of the participation of common people to on-line discussions (forums) comes from the production of the so called “User generated content”. This is a very important amount of material that can be used to understand what citizenship thinks about city, urban life and space. This bottom-up urban ideology can be typically rescued through the discussions about the new urban projects of transformation which aroused a great interest on the web. The methodology used to analyze the on-line material and the related authors involves the reading of texts and the classifying of images to find out some recurrent issues or basic frames. Moreover a qualitative approach must imply a direct contact with the web users by interviews and questionnaires. A first conclusion of this work-in-progress seems to outline from one side a gap between the disciplinary critical knowledge and the current web-based opinions and from another side the presence of a request by some web users of an hyper-dense, high rising and sometimes decontextualized city probably due to the specific web-generated imagery.

Keywords: on line community, urban transformation, image of the city

1. Introduction

The purpose of my research is to inquire into the ideas and the visions about contemporary cities and nowadays urban transformations as they emerge from the discussion forums on the internet. The importance of involving citizenship in planning and decision making about urban transformations and landscape preservation is nowadays well accepted as an issue and a pre-condition of an aware design of space based on the social consent. Most of the interest is obviously turned to the population of stakeholders as the people that would have more reason to be opponent or supporter of a specific project. But in my opinion a large part of people spread all over the city (or even in the suburbs), that are not directly touched by plans or projects, just have an opinion about them and about the city as a whole. This set of ideas can be very



interesting, if not immediately, at least in a long time perspective. The way of thinking contemporary city in fact should be taken into account and analyzed as a general background from which planning activity can have help or handicap. From this point of view the web communities give us an excellent opportunity to detect a sometimes not very visible substratum of thoughts, wishes and expectations.

2. Research context

The world wide web nowadays can be considered as a mass media due to its capability to reach a great amount of people at least in advanced countries. It is also well known since the nineties that the role of mass media is to produce the social memory and the knowledge from which every communication can start (Luhmann N., 1996). This is an issue clearly referred to the traditional mass media society but with the development of the web society new forms of sociality could grown under the shape of an on-line-network around individual choices, preferences or interests. These people associations can be considered, in a renewed sense, “communities” as well. The key point is that virtual communities must not be necessarily seen as less significant or intense than the off-line ones (Castells M., 2001). If on-line communities shape culture and memory for themselves (and for society as a whole) we can ask ourselves: what kind of culture (images, narrations etc...) is this? And in which way do these communities work? The starting point is considering this new kind of culture as a participative culture due to its bottom-up proceeding: the so called “grassroot” phenomenon (Jenkins, H., 2006). It is also very important here to recall the emerging of a fundamental feature of this web-based production which is the so called “peer production” that involves people in free association without hierarchical guidance or authority-based frame (Benkler Y., 2006). In parallel with this recent developments a great attention was given in the last years to the issue of file sharing against the “commodification” of culture” (Lessig L., 2004) with cases such as the free software and the open source. So the issue of the user-generated content, involving especially images and videos (Burgess J., Green J., 2009), is under debate as a new form of culture able to shape our ideas.

3. Case study

The case study that can help us to understand the way in which the web communities can produce and spread images and text on the internet is taken from a group of forums quite developed in the last five years: skyscrapercity.com. This is a set of forum that regards the entire world and focuses its attention especially on urban transformation projects. Every discussion forum (or better threads) is, less or more, about one single project although sometimes they can be split into more sub-threads when a project takes different paths of construction or it is too wide to be accurately followed by the users. A zoning of the posts concerning Italy among north, centre, south and islands shows a quite predictable leadership of the north for the number of threads (discussion forums) in parallel with the number of projects in progress (Table1).

Regions:	Number of Threads	Number of posts
North	157	153.291
Centre	44	74.529
South and islands	51	131.940
Total	252	359.760

Figure 1. Zooning of threads and posts in Italy.

But what is more important it is the great number of post including comments, images replies and so on. Anyway among all the forums one of the most frequented is the Milan one also due to the great number of large scale projects recently designed and in course of realization in this city. Interventions such as “Citylife”, “Porta Nuova”, “Varesine”, “Palazzo Lombardia” gather a lot of users on the web (Figure 1) around the monitoring of the building yards, the possible variations from the original design, the time lags on the scheduled plan, the reaction of neighbourhood against the realizations and the foreseeing of the final outcome in comparison with the original design.




Figure 1. Screenshot of Italy-centred forums.

The quantity and variety of the participations in the forums about Milan can so offer a case study with a remarkable material. It is in fact evident that the large interest about these urban transformations shows a phenomenon that must be studied.

4. Approach

According to Barabási the world wide web is a network with a scale invariance (Barabási A., 2002) which means that, although the web is expanding time after time, the number of nodes really important is constant. It is quite clear that not all the users have the same role in a web community: someone is more active (it posts more comments, more images and gains more reliability among the others). But this is not to be considered as a limit because, just to make an example, the more expert users often spur the others to improve their engagement and capabilities (Ito M. et al., 2009). This is also a typical aspect of forums (or blog as well). Not all the users are at the same level but the more active ones do have a role in listening, expressing doubt, rescuing materials, proposing and accepting themes of discussion. In other words they can collect opinions, synthesize, shape discussions and orient the threads. These “influencers” can be so easily put in relation with the well-known “two-steps-flow of communication” theory (Lazarsfeld P., Berelson B., Gaudet H., 1944) according to which in a communicating process there is not just a linear relation between a message and its reception. It is so clear that in this case a quantitative method can not be just the proper, or better the unique, way to detect what is going on in a forum. The most recent suggestion about the analysis of the web media quite agree about the importance of this source, for example to prevent viral communications that can produce image damages to corporations. But they also agree that in case of blogs or forums a qualitative analysis must be considered as a specific tool for these particular kinds of communication networks (Chieffi D., 2012). So a series of contacts and semi-structured interviews (Figure 2) is needed. An inquiry on the relationship of the users with the web, on their education and sentiment of citizenship, on their concepts of space and images through questions can reveal important aspects about this population. Besides this a direct analysis of the posts (including images, texts, maps and so on) can support a better constructed methodological approach to such a vast panorama of data.

Il questionario è strutturato in tre parti. Questa è la terza e riguarda il vostro rapporto con la città (Milano in particolare). E' strutturato per registrare partecipazione, appartenenza, coinvolgimento, visioni collettive e private degli spazi della città. Per riportare percorsi, luoghi e momenti preferenziali etc...delle vicende e dell'immagine della città di Milano.



Data intervista:.....Luogo Intervista:.....Modalità (diretta, on line, etc.):.....

QUESTIONARIO Parte 3° "CITIZEN".

D: Nick-name nel forum:
.....

D: In quale città o comune risiedi?.
.....

D: Se sei di Milano in che parte della città risiedi?
 Entro la cerchia dei Navigli entro i bastioni entro la circonvallazione esterna (filoviaria)
 al di fuori della circonvallazione esterna (filoviaria)

D: Quale parte della città di Milano frequenti maggiormente (per studio, lavoro svago etc...)?
.....

Figure 2. Example of questionnaire.

5. Outcomes

The outcome of this survey is a collection of ideas and images about urban projects with a great interest for a researcher. First of all users monitor the building yards sometimes every day with photos. In the consequent discussions many of the questions referred to the photos are about technical details, times of realization, links between the images and the plan but also about the possible final result if equal or different from the original design. One of the most quoted preoccupations is, for example, about the highness of the building at the end of the intervention. Another very important element is the reference to international environments. Often it is in fact possible to find quotation (through text or images) to similar intervention in foreign countries as a comparison point with Milan buildings under construction. Many of the photos are taken just to show elements of interest strictly focused on part of the buildings or the small area more than on the relationship with the context anyway. Although the main urban transformations can collect the majority of posts and followers almost every little area with a foreseen project is scheduled as well. But it is pretty curious that among this large selection of projects there is not a great interest for green spaces such as parks, gardens and so on. This even though in the recent past Milan has foreseen green spaces and international competitions about them such as the Forlanini park (formerly won by Gonçalo Byrne) which now still has great problems in its starting. By the analysis data it is important to report the average portrait of the users. Among the different characteristics we can outline the profile of people with a quite good education level and with a discrete social position. Their background does not necessarily involve technical training or specific education. Anyway they are perfectly informed about the debate on these areas: often they know the opponents and their topics, the building corporation activities, the political debate, the real estate market (figure 3) and the different architectonic contests in the world (including archi-stars works especially). Some of them have also interest in contemporary arts, industrial design and a general attraction for fashion world and upper class lifestyle. Finally many of them are Milan-based but usually they are not just strictly in the neighbourhood of the area taken into the discussion.

REAL ESTATE SI PROFILA LA COSTITUZIONE DI UN FONDO IMMOBILIARE. CON LA MEDIAZIONE DELL'EX DI SVILUPPO ITALIA

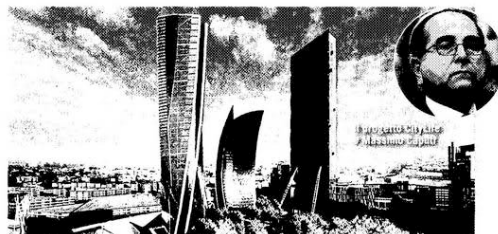
Caputi cerca casa a CityLife

CityLife come le ex aree Falck. Anche per la riqualificazione dell'ex polo fieristico di Milano potrebbe essere un fondo immobiliare il mezzo attraverso cui i quattro soci coinvolti (CityLife, Generali, Allianz, Lamaro e Ligresti), potranno alleggerire l'esposizione nei confronti delle banche aprendo allo stesso tempo le porte a nuovi capitali. L'ipotesi allo studio è ancora in una fase embrionale e potrebbe subire qualche modifica prima di essere messa in atto. Ma, a grandi linee, si basa sulla creazione di un fondo immobiliare nel quale far confluire due delle tre torri disegnate dagli architetti Daniel Libeskind, Arata Isozaki e Zaha Adid. Non è escluso che si possa trattare di un fondo speculativo e che a gestirlo venga chiamata Generali properties sgr. Quello che si profila è uno spin off del progetto per la parte relativa agli uffici, mentre le residenze e l'albergo di lusso (che dovreb-

be essere ospitato nella terza torre) restano in capo alla società CityLife. A differenza dell'operazione messa in piedi da Risanao per Sesto San Giovanni, in questo caso i proprietari del fondo non sarebbero le banche, ma i quattro soci, con la facoltà, però, di poter successivamente collocare presso investitori istituzionali parte delle quote del fondo stesso. Un processo un po' complesso, ma che ha il vantaggio di produrre benefici fiscali, di poter utilizzare al massimo la leva prevista dai fondi speculativi e di deconsolidare parte del debito. Il progetto è tuttora allo studio delle banche finanziatrici dell'operazione CityLife, progetto che prevede un investimento di 2 miliardi di euro (di cui 525 milioni sono stati spesi per l'acquisto dell'area) per la realizzazione dell'intero complesso, che sorgerà entro il 2014 su uno spazio di 255 mila metri quadrati. Il pool di istituti di credito, capitanato da EuroHypo e composto da Banca Popolare di Milano, Calyon,

Intesa Sanpaolo, Unicredit e Mediobanca, si è impegnato a coprire l'80% dell'intera spesa e ora si deve sedere intorno a un tavolo per valutare attentamente l'impatto dell'ipotesi di riassetto finanziario di CityLife sui propri conti. Ma non ci dovrebbe essere nessun intoppo, anche perché il fondo immobiliare in via di costituzione (e che deve avere il via libera della Banca d'Italia) avrebbe già alcuni aspiranti acquirenti. Secondo quanto risulta al *Mondo*, infatti, un gruppetto di casse previdenziali e fondi pensione si sarebbe già fatto avanti per rilevarne una fetta nel momento in cui Generali, Allianz, Lamaro e Ligresti intendessero rivolgersi al mercato. L'affare vede il ruolo attivo di Massimo Caputi, che in questo caso non agirebbe in qualità di amministratore delegato della Firmis sgr, ma come mediatore a titolo personale in virtù delle relazioni ormai storiche intrattenute con il mondo degli investitori istituzionali legati al settore della previdenza.

Mariarosaria Marchesano



I NUMERI DELL'OPERAZIONE

255 MILA METRI QUADRATI DI SUPERFICIE COMPLESSIVA DI CUI OLTRE **100 MILA** DESTINATI A VERDE E **27 MILA** A PARCHEGGI. **2 MILIARDI** DI EURO L'INVESTIMENTO PREVISTO PER LA REALIZZAZIONE DEL PROGETTO. **523 MILIONI** DEI QUALI RAPPRESENTANO IL COSTO DI ACQUISTO DELL'AREA E **200 MILIONI** LE RISORSE DESTINATE A OPERE DI INTERESSE PUBBLICO. L'**80%** È LA PERCENTUALE A CARICO DELLE BANCHE (IL RESTANTE **20%** È L'EQUITY MESSO SUL PIATTO DAI SOCI)

Figure 3. Newspaper cutting about real estate marked posted in the forum

6. Possible interpretations

The portrait of the followers is quite complex to consider. But first of all it is quite clear they are not just ingenuous. Even when they support the main speculative intervention with high intensity of cubature it is not so easy to reduce them to simple victims of urban marketing. Their level of awareness about local and international transformations process is not so low to be considered naïve without further explanation. They are, on the opposite, sometimes quite skilful personalities, and the quality of their home made renderings (although not very precise or correctly dimensioned) is an evidence of a certain ability to get in some way inside the projects. And this is in order to look for elements that are not clearly evident at first sight. The average of their cultural experiences is not certainly restricted to their birthplace city and their images scenario and iconic frame can be considered, if not wide, at least in deep going in their interest. Concerning this we can report that the source of their information is more based on visual elements and less on critical texts and specific books. Anyway most of these web-users have often no strict interest or benefit in the process of urban transformation and planning and do not have a disciplinary background about architecture or planning. Therefore we can consider their products at least as an unselfish outcome of a great interest in their environment. This sort of local pride for the city can be registered as a positive element and also as an emotional and intellectual involvement. As a consequence of this engagement the users find a strong stimulation to get inside specific problems such as building yard questions (Figure 4).



Figure 4. *Photo of Garibaldi-Repubblica area in transformation.*

In fact we can say that what they know about technical details is rescued on the net. There is so a sort of specific training on-line based on autonomous research but moreover on the dialogue with other users in a self-building process inside the community. The support for high rise buildings and a hyper-dense city that refers to international metropolis or even megalopolis can be seen in some way as a visual and spatial parallel of the debate about “apocalyptic” and “integrated” mass media public. In short words the “integrated” are people who perceive enthusiastically the mass media communication as a social resource to inform, educate and entertain citizens (Eco U., 1964). The users could in fact be enrolled among them thanks to the typical influence of their specific and deep relationship with new technology and web-media.

7. Conclusions

The survey of the web forums about the city image can be considered as an important analysis of a specific ideology which is nowadays spreading among very interested and motivated users. The approach to this phenomenon could point out some interesting outcomes: interest for city transformations, admiration for high rise building, attraction for international experiences, indifference for urban context and appreciation of building density. It is possible to find positive elements such as the interest for urban development, the incentive to understand specific technical problems, the pursuit of images and reference not restricted to a local environment, the necessity of comparison with foreign examples and so on. But also problematic issues such as the undervaluation of the urban context, the lack of critical approach, sometime the self-referential evaluation and little familiarity with the last developments of urban research.

In conclusion it is anyway possible to underline from one side a gap between the disciplinary criticism expressed by academics and the current opinions of, at least, a part of the web-related citizenship. From another side the presence of a particular way to conceive urban image due probably to the way of communicating and raising material on the web. Some possible suggestion both for design and for future work could so be a more specific attention to the way in which academic criticism reaches the public: probably books and publications are not enough to reach all the communities of interests and of practice. Moreover another research issue concerns the necessity to investigate better the way these users build their critical approach and their imagery throughout specific communication channels, interactions and references.

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