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Thinking about an Agreement between Anthropology and Urban Planning

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This article explores the possibility and the potential of an agreement between anthropology and the subjects concerned with urban planning. I retrace the development of Anthropology starting by the functionalist tradition of the 1960s until the post-modernist methodological afterthought. In the second part of the essay I introduce some remarks about a not conventional ethnographical case study to suggest some key elements that could be the starting point for a dialogue between the subjects I mentioned above. I eventually briefly highlight some problems related to the difficulties in the cooperation between planners and social scientists: I focus on the matter of the population involvement in the projects and on the verification ex-post of the urban interventions.

Thinking about an agreement between anthropology and urban planning

Anthropology started to be concerned with urban studies meanwhile it was still focused on the worlds outside the “developed countries”, on those colonies that suddenly started to seem less and less inhabited by “primitive”, and always more influenced by the West, where the researchers came from. In the 1950s the researchers of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute dealt with the particular features of the life in the first slums arose around the North African cities (Hannerz, 1980).

At that time it was already clear that the space was the physical translation of an economic system, capable to articulate men and women’s life style.

Despite this way to work is rather questionable, the attempt to find a causal order in these phenomena was, at that time, the life blood of a subject that was about to shift its attention to another field: the native country itself. In the same period Le Corbusier launched *Cité radieuse*, in which he formalize for the first time the so called *Unité d’Habitation*: this concept embodied the philosophical remarks about the “living”, the “inhabiting”, that ended up to influence all the speculations in the next decades (Sbriglio, 2004).

The *Unité d’Habitation* was based on a pedagogical intent (Amendola, 2009): shaping the living spaces in order to mould a particular kind of man suitable to live them. The habitation had an important task and it had to face it in the best way possible: it was the smallest cell of that organism, the city, that had to develop according to rational and functional criterions.

In the same period Anthropology itself was focused on a functionalist model, a definition that nourished different subjects as it was part of a *Zeitgeist*. The architect shaped the space in order to create the best environment for the citizen belonging to an industrial world in expansion, the anthropologist looked for proves of a dynamic balance in order to explain how society so struck from the entropy could stay so intact. The urban development in the European cities from the 1960s to the 1980s shaped the space we still live in according to a model that today is questioned. Furthermore every urban action sparks off complex dynamics related to the building of an edifice, or a district, its maintenance, the way in which a group of people comes to set up, the relationship with areas and people in the proximity.

Once aware of the limits of the functionalism, the “thoughtful planners” raises from the ranks and put the “ideology of the omnipotence planning” (Amendola, 2009, p.7) in a difficult position.

The idea of the city as a complex space, or better, the complexity as the main characteristic of the city is now accepted but it was not at first (Morin, 1990).

The city is a place in which different trajectories come to be superimposed and in which different roles intersect very much, on an higher level than the previous settlement and the today’s rural ones.

The disposal of the spaces itself is not set according to the logic of separation but according to the articulation of the functions; the more the social changes are fast, the more the meanings, the values, get sediment (Amendola, 1997).

Specialists and researchers from different fields have focused on the urbs in order to make it more suitable for a social fabric that keeps on change following frenetic rhythms. They have also tried to forecast the future, the features of the future population who would have come and adapted itself, letting the space and its articulations disciplining it (La Cecla, 1993).

Nowadays the unpredictability makes the predictions even harder, less effective and, in the same time, the cooperation with the citizens in problematic. Many parts of the city have lost their original meaning and they have difficulty to find new ones; moreover the functions that shaped the space seem to be insufficient for the citizens and their needs: as Amendola argues, we are facing a period in which the “desire” has replaced the “need” as leading mechanism (Amendola, 2009). In this context, Anthropology offers specific instruments for researches and promotes the dialogue and the cooperation between citizens and architecture and urban planning.

I took the cue’s to talk about these issues observing some district in which I used to work as counters reader. I’m not going to show the details of the dates I collected, but I will state some methodological considerations.



A preliminary remark is important to clarify my role in this field: in December 2009 I started to collaborate with a cooperative that monitors the water consumption of the ACER houses in Bologna and its provinces. Twice per year some officers have to check the water consumption house by house: from the beginning of December to mid-January, from the beginning of June to mid-July.

I am an officer myself and during the years I have come to work in always more districts, ending up to raise almost half of the ACER houses.

Most of them are block of flats and houses built from the 1940s and the 1980s, mostly located in suburban areas of the city.

During the last 3 years I had had contacts with the tenants for 9 months, and I took advantage from this opportunity to ask people about their opinions and considerations about their life's style. A simple work turned into a good research occasion, although quite anomalous. I started to use anthropological theories and methodologies to analyze a no-conventional situation. Because of the role I had as an officer, I had access to about a hundred houses, more than once; I had also the chance to observe the way in which the inhabitants are used to live their district and to and benefit from it.

The third time I was working in these areas, I started to venture some comparisons between the different districts I had the opportunity to hang out at, and also some remarks about the changes during the time.

The first consideration I want to suggest is about the relationship I established with the tenants, that gives me the opportunity to access to certain kind of informations and facts I would have not in other circumstances. The attitude of the inhabitants changes case by case, some of them are cautious, others are more cooperative and available; someone recognizes me and treats me as a vague acquaintance. Someone is polemical for identifying me as a generic representative of the "institute", word standing for Autonomous Institute for Popular Houses (Istituto Autonomo Case Popolari), whose jurisdiction is testified by signs at the beginning of the houses paths.

I'm thought the responsible when there are some problems or malfunctionings and it is often the conditions of the houses to make these people disappointed.

Some people take for granted I know very well about some unsettled problems they have been facing for a long time, years, decades. Anyway, it is immediately recognized my role as a cooperator with the ACER, circumstance they sometimes think can help them in some way: our relationship, then, can also acquire an utilitarian connotations.

It is interesting to notice the different graduations of meanings implied, from the officer –me- as the responsible for the problems to the officer as a possible solution of them, circumstances that would have not been possible if I had introduced myself as a simple researcher. An ACER officer is better categorized because of his involvement in a some kind of hierarchy of responsibilities. There are also situations in which people regarded me a simple worker from a low social rank, and so I am considered capable to understand their problems way better than other subjects.

I think this element is very important in both the two situations introduced above: in the first case people tell me about their problems in an aggressive way because they have probably already talked about that many times without getting back any solutions; in the second case, people talk to me looking for a sort of complicity that justify certain kind of discourses that, otherwise, would not have a reasonable justification.

A simple researcher would have probably had to face the distrust of people. Many inhabitants built gates and armored doors, paying very much attention to people who ask to come in.

When a tenant comes to verify I'm not a profiteer or a criminal of some sort, they take it upon themselves to reassure the other tenants as well about who I am and what I am doing there.

A lot of people, mostly old people, they have come to be scared and skeptic about other people, strangers, and also about other tenants, because of the messages coming from the TV news.

The Popular Houses' tenants, particularly in certain districts, absorb every day rhetorical discourses about how dangerous is the areas in which they live in; they also recognize signs of degradation and marginality around them ending up to act in ways that, as Fava argues, "reify a stigma" (Fava 2007).

As said above, the mistrust can turn into confidence thanks to just one single tenant. Having ascertained who I am, they take care to inform their neighbors. In these cases, my visit can turn into a sociable occasion among tenants, in which they start to visit each other; it happens something different where the atmosphere is tenser.

The Popular inhabitations are usually equipped of common areas, rarely indoor, that they do not use that much. It often happens these common spaces are rearranged as warehouses to stock for useless things.

Sometimes there are furniture skeletons, cars or motorbike shells and other items of this sort.

There is usually some kind of boundary delimiting the stocks of houses areas, it is easy to recognize them because of the lack of up keeping.

Businesses and other sociable spaces are out of this border; even when closed to each other, their separation it is evident.

All these elements I analyzed make manifest the difference between the potential space of the planning, and the effective space of the everyday life (Gans, 1968). Anthropology can get its own action space exactly in this margin.

At the end of the 1980s, anthropology and the other social sciences used to be driven by a critical approach that influenced the result both in a positive and a negative way (Marcus, Fisher, 1986).

The post-modernists argumentations mark a turning point in the methodology followed: it was put forward by the observation and the studying of the typical anthropological field, the colonies and the “far world”, where the colonial empire were dismantled. At that point, anthropologists started to analyze and criticize the “developing model” based on the proliferation of Non-Governative Organization (Ferguson, 1990).

Many post-modernist considerations could be useful in the nowadays urban anthropology, interested in the western society.

The functionalist approach gives the idea about the city as fractioned, each area of the city is thought to discharge different duties. This organization drove to the “belonging crisis”, and to the people neglect for the surrounding space; the great mobility characterizing these times of migrations amplify the detachment from the local community.

People involved in participative projects are too often afferent to specific groups, instead of the other are not caught or just not interested. Entire ranges of citizens have a low knowledge of the language, a low education level.

The formulation of techniques and intervention strategies suited to increase the participation level requires preliminary researches to understand the problems linked to these approaches themselves.

The assessment of the urban interventions to amplify the population involvement in the planning activities have not been that spread above all after the 1960s, after the functionalist experimentations. Paolo Costa detects different reasons causing the low spread of this instrument that during the years came to be used for the commercial buildings (Costa, 2009)

First, these kind of intervention requires a cost to pay the work, a cost that the realizers feel as posterior and so not their jurisdiction.

Second, this operation is seldom seen as useful for the future planning activities. Moreover the Social scientists are usually not involved in these fields because of the difficult interdisciplinary dialogue.

They have to learn to make understandable their knowledge, making the planners adopting them.

The “observation” has been suddenly recognized as one of the possible way of the evaluation ex-post (Costa, 2009).

The anthropological methodology requires an high level of involvement of the researcher and an alert fieldwork; the dialogue with the inhabitants, rather than a reflection about them, has to be the most important way to work.

Encouraging people involvement into the planning activities can lead to the requalification of already existent urban spaces in order to improve the life standards.



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