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## What's up-to-date in Cesare Chiodi's theories on city planning and what's not?

Graziella Tonon

In 1916 Patrick Abercrombie called *Der Städtebau*, by architect Hermann Joseph Stübgen, 'a 'goldmine' for future book-building masons'. Without a doubt, one of those masons who drew quite a bit of material from that mine was the engineer, Cesare Chiodi. In the history of city planning, the founder of the *Istituto di Tecnica Urbanistica del Politecnico di Milano* cannot be compared to Ildefonso Cerdá or to Raymond Unwin, only to mention two other engineers who also became city planners. However, to continue with the same metaphor, that does not negate the fact that he is considered a master mason in the Italian world. The extraordinary abundance of his written work alone suggests this. Moreover, the esteem he is held in by those belonging to the engineer camp and those in the architect camp, including that inner circle of the younger and battle-trained rationalists, further substantiates his authoritative nature. If Le Corbusier's brilliant, paradoxical writings are not enough to convince us how topical his futuristic visions of the building industry are, we can still agree with him when he promulgates and explains his concept of 'functional city', that is rationally organized in all of its forms. Despite numerous similarities, the functionalism of the rationalist architects and that of Chiodi derive from different concepts of rationality. For architects, functionalism is part of a rationality that belongs to a prevalently anti-bourgeois, anti-capitalistic school of thought in some cases and makes

its objective satisfying human needs, as abstract and understated that idea might be. It pursues the goal of humanizing techniques. On the other hand, Chiodi's functionalism belongs to the rationality of productivity-driven liberal thought coming from that very sector of industrial technicians and scholars who defended free business and the law of the market and which saw Francesco Mauro as one of its major experts. According to this approach, it was not human needs but the need to add value to the 'industrial phenomenon' which in the Milan area in the 1920's and 30's took the form of the "great factory", that was the independent variable. The rationale behind creating settlements had to bow to this so as to 'produce better to live better, but also live better to produce better'. In this light, 'the city planning question' could no longer be 'too unilaterally relegated to the camp of city organization and aesthetics' but became a problem of controlling the masses within the territory. As a consequence, a precise definition of the tasks city planning had to perform in a modern industrialized society emerged: it had to be "the science and art of regulating ... not so much ... streets, houses, neighbourhoods, cities, but human being themselves". Certainly the polemics that Chiodi repeatedly engaged in over 'merely architectural visions', whether they were "Sitte's followers' [or] the Dutch Berlage's or Piacentini's and Giovannoni's", did not keep him from learning from the teachings of 'civic art', to his credit. The attention paid to the aesthetics of the whole; the need for architecture to give life to urban tracts and not just to objects; the criticism of the excesses of expressive individualism which could destroy a

place's fascination and generate disorder; the awareness that "it is inconceivable to study a neighbourhood, a piazza, a street without taking into consideration both altimetric and planimetric aspects"; the belief that an urban plan must also take into consideration a third dimension and cannot limit itself to a series of beautiful plan drawings. Even though all that seems very much up-to-date today, in a world where architecture seemed to go in the opposite direction, in the years between the two world wars, those thoughts were not Chiodi's alone, nor was that his most original thinking. The attention paid to issues of urban aesthetics and to the building aspects of city planning was part of a common feeling that is still widely diffused among architects of all persuasions. Rather, where Chiodi was particularly innovative with respect to tradition lies in having been insistent in maintaining that the city is in the first place an economic organism [in which] roads, houses, factories, offices, transportation, etc. [are] a work tool the primary purpose of which is to function well and economically and not 'appear' beautiful. From the Milan area observatory in the twenties and thirties, where Chiodi's city planning ideas matured, for the industrial city to 'function well and economically" it was required, above all, that industry continued to be guaranteed the low wages on which a large part of its development was founded, but which were irreconcilable with the high cost of city life. Therefore its use of large masses of workers reproduced and dislocated to extraurban areas was of vital necessity. An economic problem which was compounded by a political one: that of removing the violent and

threatening conflicts that were exploding in the aftermath of the First World War during the so-called 'biennio rosso' and which risked subverting the already consolidated power relationship between capital and labour. Given this context, in Chiodi's ideal vision the modern city, which had become an enormous settlement of workshops, in order to function 'well and economically', could no longer be the place of residence for masses of workers. In particular the urbanization of the Milan area was to be avoided as regards those fine and healthy half-farming half-working class families which were not a trivial force of production, of conservation, of balance supplying the brawn for the day-to-day work in the city without cutting off their roots from healthy soil of life in the country. Two strategies were to be adopted: in the first place a 'complete overhaul' of the old worker neighbourhoods through the use of 'necessary though ill-famed guttings'. In the second, the establishment of a regional vision and of a city planning policy capable of involving the territorial dimension to promote a daily exchange between the city and the country [through] the most perfect organization of transportation means in order to facilitate the daily ebb and flow of the masses of workers. Subways, urban and rural tramlines, local railroads, automobiles are a necessary functional element of the extending city characterized by the decentralization of urban nuclei, by the rarefaction of construction, by the limitation of demographic density ... A purely static vision of the urban organism which was the inspiration for cities in the past, today is transformed in a dynamic vision. In this limpid vision of 1931, which almost anticipated the

current concept of the 'diffused city', Chiodi does none other than systematize processes that had already been in act in the Lombardy area and which formed the basis for contemporary metropolis, putting them in an ideal order. The distinctive characteristics of this new situation, above all the enormous dimensions of the commuter population, practically a travelling city, were already so evident that, at the Lombard congress for working class housing developments sponsored by Reale società d'igiene (Royal Health Group) in 1936, more than one observed that in Milan area the 'città dispersa' (sprawling city) already existed.

In his collection of writings dedicated to Cesare Chiodi published in 1957, Dodi maintained that the new things his maestro contributed to the study of urban planning were two: the first, to have separated it from "the simple conception of urban problems in terms of architectonics and particularism which up until then had been followed [leading him to observe them] in social, demographic and economic terms as well"; the second, to have freed "the planning of the urban composition from outdated isotropic development models ... 'like oil spots', as he called them, to bring it to new, open and articulated forms and larger territorial visions". The first of his innovations is still valid today. As far as the second is concerned, having turned urban planning to new forms and articulated them to the scale of the territory, which was a dramatic break with the very spatiality of traditional urban planning, does not seem to have enriched the capability of planning residential areas by city planning. If in the analysis and interpretation of the phenomena surrounding the development of settlements

it is right to break away from urban-centric visions and open them up to the wider territorial dimensions, in planning and designing cities the city still represents a rich source of learning as long as city planning values the quality of living the space.

Yet Chiodi didn't perceive the complexity and the richness of meaning that the historical city kept and still can keep. Instead he was firmly convinced that it was necessary to 'dilute the city in the country' and create a polycentric organism "without too many tight restrictions imposed by models or systems". Historic city centers, satellite nuclei, new neighbourhoods had to be arranged in a way that they were separated by rural areas following a principle of differentiation as would be the case in a "vast workshop [in which] everything must have its place, every function its organ". Transportation means played a crucial role: they had to provide a rapid connection between 'the travelling masses and the fixed concrete stones' in order to "have the most social well-being and profit with the least use of energy and economic means". The need for rapid movement prevailed over quietness in Chiodi's mind. The concept of the city street was overturned. In regarding the rue corridor as a residential area and not just for transit, the hydraulic concept of the street as a canal of traffic prevailed and the circulation function became the deciding factor in the choice and design of its routes. An engineering approach to the street overtook an architectonic approach. The threads of modern flows: motorways, raised thruways, expressways, ring roads, tunnels, overpasses, underpasses, safety roads, traffic islands, exits, tram and train tracks had the right of way along side rail-based transportation means

as forms for constituting open spatiality.

Any settlement inserted in this network of relationships, even those that lacked characteristics of urbs could proudly bear the label of urban as long as its residents worked in industry or services and had access to 'every kind of commercial or cultural activity modern life offers'.

But 'furnishing each inhabitant adequate conditions for his life, work and rest' does not guarantee, as Chiodi maintained, that 'the continuity and splendour of city life can be assured'. If the beauty of 'body of the urbs' is not recreated as well, it is difficult for that splendour to emerge. The beauty of the city cannot be traced to order or hierarchy. For it to exist, there must be dialogue tension between buildings, between open and closed spaces, between evenness and unevenness, as even Chiodi himself attributed, if at end of his life and even though not explicitly, to "historic city centers ... with their irrationality, but with their warmth".

Functional and social complexities are not always synonymous with chaos. Social zoning creates ghettos that are no less dangerous than the 'promiscuity' between social classes and functional zoning creates alternating congestion and emptiness in the use of space. As far as an ideal size is concerned, large, compact cities with an 'isotropic' development can still be a source of culture and civilization. It is not necessarily true that there is 'something indomitable and threatening' to quote Henry Ford. Much depends on how they are planned and administered. Just as those small satellite elements, which according to Chiodi should support the 'polycentric' expansion of the city, can be the site of 'violent convulsions and [of

unrest'.

Not just that. When polycentric expansion leads to 'splitting urban masses up' through the proliferation in rural territory of small 'nuclei of buildings' that are functionally specialized and are held together only by a transportation network, the risk is that it will erode soil destined for rural landscape and destroy the beauty of thousand-year-old rural construction without being able to replace it with the beauty of the city. The disastrous conditions into which many of the principal metropolitan areas in Italy have fallen demonstrate that.

Chiodi cites a few initial warning signs in two of his writings: one in 1952 on *Gli eccessi della pubblicità stradale* (The excesses of roadside advertising) in which he denounced "the offence that unregulated spreading [and] intrusiveness of advertising installed along the roadside [caused] to landscape"; the other in 1954, on *Gli italiani, questi sciuponi* (These Italians what squanderers) in which he lamented the "slaughter of that inestimable wealth ... that is the beauty of our country". One substantial difference however distinguishes the period that followed from the fifties. The decentralization of the city and the corresponding expansion of buildings did not only have an impact on ever increasing numbers of workers who were unable to deal with the rise of rents and the extremely high costs of city life. The big factories were also hit and when they were not shut down outright, they were dismembered, miniaturized, decreeing the end of an era in Italy: that of the industrial city and of the imposing and organized masses of factory workers. What Chiodi wished for, in many ways came true: the conflict regarding jobs today is no longer a threat, economic liberalism has

won many times over. The contemporary metropolis does not correspond however to that 'glorious Taylorization' that he imagined "where everything [had] to have its place [so as] to achieve the best return with the least expense of human energy and economic means". The 'vast workshop' is more similar to an old rusty machine. It is out of tune, it causes trouble and waste that weighs on the very efficiency of mobility, which was supposed to be 'agile', and without 'friction' and penalized both economic activity and the quality of life.

The process of the dismembering of the industrial city, which Chiodi considered necessary in 1943 to assure the final 'de-citifying' of the population, in fact happened in a most irrational way, in total disarray. Backed by city planning policy that was so liberal as to be nonexistent, the lack of public control, on which Chiodi himself had insisted a lot, over space on a territorial basis and which was necessary to ensure coordination among the choices of locating jobs, housing, services and the system of transportation, was decisive.

Chiodi the liberal was aware that "private speculation ... as legitimate as you want, has its own natural and respectable points of view that do not always coincide with those of city government": private speculation left to itself "with weak brakes and weak controls leads to anarchy" and becomes a source of social contradiction. From this point of view, the period between the two wars was a litmus test. How much not only revolutionary ideologies but also the disasters caused by the egoism of laissez faire without rules were responsible for the burning political climate of those years has been demonstrated.

Years which were marked

by the occupation of the factories and the spreading of claims that threatened the foundations of the free industrial enterprise: precisely that 'phenomenon' that Chiodi believed to be central for the country's economy and civil progress and which, consequently, was not open for discussion.

How could the problem of excessive urban rents be avoided? How could the uses of space be controlled in such a way that reproduction costs for the masses of workers would not turn on the needs of manufacturing? These questions had strategic importance for Chiodi: they represented the playing fields and were cause for reflection for 'administrator' city planners that were just as important if not more than those typical of the 'technician' or the 'artist'. It is in this area, more respectful of the law and practical problems regarding 'the actual implementation' of plans more than of problems in urban techniques and planning, where Chiodi's contribution appears to be exceptionally up-to-date even today. In fact, we are living in times of liberal extremism once again dominated by an unconditional faith in the market and its powers of self regulation and in the celebration of private virtue in the use and management of public resources including that very precious resource: the soil, which cannot be reproduced and is not susceptible to being treated as goods.

To face this political climate in which it has "even been suggested to overthrow centuries of history and make soil planning through the use of negotiated acts instead of decrees", certain affirmations Chiodi made regarding law and city planning practice make his bourgeois, liberal, moderate line of thinking revolutionary.