



(ibidem) Planum Readings

#08
2017/2

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by Planum. The Journal of Urbanism
Supplemento al n. 35, vol. II/2017
ISSN 1723-0993
Registered by the Court of Rome on 04/12/2001
Under the number 514-2001

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(ibidem) è un progetto ideato da Marco Cremaschi.

Impaginazione: Francesco Curci
Progetto grafico: Nicola Vazzoler
Immagine di copertina:
Centrale termica a concentrazione solare, Ivanpah, California
Foto di Francesco Secchi 2017 ©

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Editoriale

- 6 *Valutare la qualità della ricerca
in urbanistica e non solo*
Scira Menoni

Incontri

- 10 *Per un diverso planning.
Idee, radici e immaginazioni nell'interfaccia
tra 'past planning' e 'planning future'*
Camilla Perrone

Lecture

- 14 *Ricordare Bernardo Secchi*
Michelangelo Russo
- 19 *Il lungo viaggio verso Biopoli*
Roberto Bobbio
- 22 *La teoria dell'urbanizzazione planetaria alla prova*
Paolo Perulli
- 25 *Cosa è l'urbanità?*
Gabriele Pasqui
- 28 *Attenzione, nessuno si senta escluso.
Il progetto urbanistico in epoca neoliberale*
Claudia Meschiari
- 31 *Eppur si muove:
The flâneuse moves around the city*
Cigdem Talu
- 33 *Distruzione, ricostruzione, 'ripresa': lo stato
dell'arte sulla pianificazione post-disastro*
Irene Bianchi

Prima Colonna

- 36 *Leggere la segregazione urbana: per un approccio on the ground*
Elena Ostanel
- 39 *Le facce molteplici della resilienza urbana in Italia e nel mondo*
Veronica Olivotto
- 42 *Communities, institutions and the messy world of contemporary urban governance*
Alessandro Coppola
- 46 *L'antropologo va al Bon Pastor. Storia, miti, retoriche e conflitti di un quartiere di Barcellona*
Gloria Pessina
- 50 *Fare rigenerazione oggi. Casi e strumenti europei per una 'città flessibile'*
Giulia Fini

Storia di copertina

- 54 *California dreaming*
Fotografie di Francesco Secchi
Testo di Laura Cibien

Scrivere una recensione significa letteralmente passare in rassegna, cioè riconoscere pregi e difetti di un'opera scorrendo per intero le sue pagine, percorrendo con gli occhi quelle righe del testo che Ivan Illich paragonava ai filari di una vigna. L'atto di recensire, dunque, è il modo di esprimere un giudizio fondato anzitutto sulla lettera del testo e solo secondariamente sul contesto. Nel suo acuto editoriale, Scira Menoni prende le distanze da un sistema di valutazione dei prodotti scientifici che finisce per dare maggiore importanza al contesto invece che al testo. L'uso dei cosiddetti parametri bibliometrici, per esempio, ricava il valore di un testo scientifico dalla sua relazione con una testata editoriale e con altri testi dai quali è citato. La reputazione sostituisce la conoscenza diretta del testo da parte di un valutatore esperto.

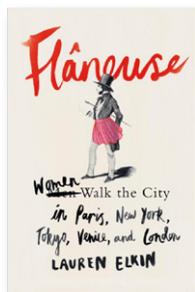
Con le sue modestissime possibilità, (ibidem) difende la valutazione in prima persona, discrezionale finché si vuole, ma basata sulle ragioni del testo. La nostra scelta di quali libri recensire non è certo neutrale, come non lo è la scelta dei recensori ai quali affidare il compito. Su (ibidem) favoriamo un confronto aperto tra libri e persone che formano il loro giudizio attraverso la lettura. Chi ci segue sa inoltre che su (ibidem) non diamo importanza alle barriere disciplinari. È benvenuto chi scrive in un modo penetrante di questioni urbane. Il sapere della città è tanto poco circoscrivibile quanto lo sono i processi di urbanizzazione planetaria di cui parla Neil Brenner. Cosa è l'urbanità al giorno d'oggi? Gabriele Pasqui se lo chiede leggendo il libro più recente di Giancarlo Consonni. La risposta non è alla portata di un singolo sapere, né forse lo è mai stata. La lettura deve seguire le tracce di urbanità liberamente, fin là dove esse la conducono.

L.G.

Cigdem Talu

Eppur si muove:

The flâneuse moves around the city



Lauren Elkin
Flâneuse. Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London
 Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York 2017
 pp. 317, \$ 27,00

«Space is not neutral. Space is a feminist issue» writes Lauren Elkin (p. 286). «The space we occupy – here, in the city, we city dwellers – is constantly being remade, unmade, constructed and wondered at» (ibidem). In her book, Elkin embarks on a journey that is part cultural history, part memoir where the figure of the flâneuse is historicized, exemplified, and redefined, initially against the background of the male flâneur. Challenging the traditional Baudelairian definition of the flâneur as a male figure who observes and wanders the streets but remains unnoticed. Elkin distinguishes the flâneuse as a subversive walker who represents an embodied experience of the city. Elkin's prose is abundant in academic witticism and evocative descriptions, be it about cities or examples she deals with. Originally from Long Island, Elkin's first urban experience occurs when she visits a friend in New York City, while attending college upstate. She transfers to Columbia University the next year. Elkin walks with a literary sensibility, especially in Paris, the city where she becomes a flâneuse (before knowing about the word) and takes interest in the impli-

cations (historical and contemporary) of being a woman walking in the city.

The book may be considered in two halves. In the first half Elkin deals with various existing definitions of both the flâneur and flâneuse, along with well-researched examples of historical flâneuses and female urban writing. The second one concentrates more on modern reiterations of the flâneuse as journalist, artist, filmmaker, and on Elkin herself. In the first chapter, like many other scholars and writers who reflect on the same topic, Elkin confronts Janet Wolff's seminal essay *The Invisible Flâneuse*, where Wolff states the division of the public and private spheres in the 19th century impeded women from strolling the city alone and carelessly, which makes a female version of the flâneur not only impossible but also inexistent. Elkin recognizes the 19th century social conditions that gave way to this remark but she suggests expanding the definition of the word: «To suggest that there couldn't be a female version of the flâneur is to limit the ways women have interacted with the city to the ways *men* have interacted with the city. We can talk about social norms and restrictions but we cannot rule out the fact that women were there; we must try to understand what walking in the city meant to them. Perhaps the answer is not to attempt to make a woman fit a masculine concept, but to redefine the concept itself» (p. 11).

The first part of the book is a *tour de force* in delivering a seemingly scholarly approach in a sharp and articulate way. Following a (re)consideration of the word 'flâneuse', the book becomes an amalgam of historical accounts of women who walked cities and wrote about them, and the author's own urban perambulations. Some of the key figures Elkin focuses on are George Sand, Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys, Marta Gellhorn, Agnes Varda, and Sophie Calle. Some of these examples get too biographical at times instead of spotlighting in detail the women's city trajectories. Weaved into the former, in the second part we begin following Elkin along her



walks in cities like New York, Paris, London, Tokyo, and Venice. These parts include moments of ingenious prose: on Martha Gellhorn who «turned flânerie into testimony» (p. 249), the passages on Sophie Calle's flânerie-stalking in Venice (which gives way to her *Suite vénitienne*), the chapter on Agnes Varda, with a masterful recount of Varda's film *Cléo de 5 à 7*. Specific and detailed definitions of the walks missing from the first chapters are recuperated in the *Cléo de 5 à 7* paragraphs. All the while, Elkin points out that the problem of the exclusively male flâneuse is still pertinent in the contemporary city by referring to the 20th century situationist *derivé-er*, or the more current psychogeographer, both prominently male figures. In fact, one of the most notable contributions of the book is a footnote, where Elkin puts together a comparative and resourceful list with figures who can be considered *des flâneuses* (this footnote almost comes as the flâneuse answer to the incredible vapid question we still might hear, maybe strolling in a museum: *can you name more than five female artists?*). In a chapter on Tokyo, faced with an urban context and texture she cannot relate to immediately, Elkin confronts the *unheimlich* boundaries of her own understanding of flânerie. The reader is made aware of the initial lack of bodily and cultural attunement the writer experiences in the city. This can be initially read both as otherness and othering in a foreign context. In Tokyo, Elkin realizes she cannot 'conquer' the city by aimlessly wandering around foot but has to get to know the city, in all layers across stairs, small streets, and infrastructural nodes. Continuing, the epilogue of the book moves beyond gender roles and wanders around and about the city itself, through the nuances of what it means to be an individual living in a city today. There are disparities of intensity and detail among the chapters but this does not turn out to be a necessarily bad thing for the book's structure. One can only imagine and hope that there were many more types of flâneuses than the European-centric middle/upper class one, which Elkin might have had to leave out for editing purposes. In the book, she comments that it is the historian's, researcher's, and flâneuse's job to unfold more and methodically formalize the flâneuse.

In an interview with *The Irish Times*, Elkin says: «Maybe she's not a woman in a man's job; maybe

the figure of the flâneuse is its own thing altogether. Maybe in a hundred years they'll be asking: can there be a flâneur? Isn't he just a male flâneuse?» (Anderson 2017). In the book, it is not only the word 'flâneuse' that is being redefined, but its verb and the concept of flânerie as a whole. Elkin's flâneuse «is not merely a female flâneur» (p. 22). However, if you look up the definition of flâneuse in Merriam-Webster (www.merriam-webster.com) you will still find the following: «a woman who is or who behaves like a flâneur» which directs to the flâneur entry «an idle man-about-town». This proves the necessity for a book like Elkin's: something that entwines the scholarly, the anecdotal, and the non-fiction genres. The flâneuse is not an *idle man-about-town*: «[...] she gets to know the city by wandering its streets, investigating its dark corners, peering behind facades, penetrating into secret courtyards. I found her using cities as performance spaces, or as hiding places; as places to seek fame and fortune or anonymity; as places to liberate herself from the oppression or to help those who are oppressed; as places to declare her independence; as places to change the world or be changed by it» (p. 22). So, the flâneuse does not only observe the city or is observed by others in the city: she engages with it, from within it.

In an article published in *The Woman's World* in 1888, cited by Elkin in her book, the writer Amy Levy remarks: «The female club-lounger, the flâneuse of St. James Street, latch-key in pocket and eye-glasses on the nose, remains a creature of the imagination». Eppur lei si muove. Yet, Amy Levy moved around the city (London). Yet, other flâneuses moved around other cities. The flâneuse is no more 'a creature of the imagination', and with *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City* Lauren Elkin opens a door. In her own words, we must «put on our shoes and go out the door» (p. 93).

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