Languages and Representations:
interpretation tools in city changing

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To introduce the seminar works dedicated to *New Urban Languages. Re-Imagining the City after the Knowledge-Based Turn,* I wish shortly recalling our starting point, eight years ago, in 2005, our previous seminar about a similar topic: *Rappresentazioni di città* (2005), organized with Daniele Villa, where in the debate the attention had been put on the pervasiveness of images, first of all on digital images, in building new urban imaginary, or respect other traditional narratives, coming for example from literature…

An intriguing painting by the Futurist painter Crali - after chosen for the cover of the proceedings - made up the leitmotiv of that seminar: the reason of the choice was why the painting, realized in 1938, is a clear celebration of the expectations addressed to technology at the beginning of Nineteenth century, expectations regarding the renewal of language, the desecration of classical myths, praised of the speed of the machine.

In a broader way our idea was that some images can play the role of metaphor for the multiplicity of the looks on the contemporary urban landscape; the zenithal view of the map, the perspective view, the path between the surfaces of the city, summarize some different points of view: from the specific look of architecture and urban planning, to that one at "ground level", shared by professionals but also by the inhabitants of the city, up to a closer inner city look, that is the sight exploring the maze and, ultimately, trying to unravel the tangled skein of urban living.

So a picture, made up often of manifold forms of representation, can been considered, a figurative expression, a metaphor of different points of view about the city, and how representations could help us to foresee city changes, city uses.

Often, in fact, an image – just like a map – tells us better than a thousand of words (though not always…): starting now from the idea of representation as a "tool" to convey discourses about the city, we are interested to broaden the debate not only considering images.

But more than in the past, even telling, narratives, languages communicating both tangible and intangible aspects of the city: so the aim pursued by the current seminar is exploring the relationships, in a broader sense, between representations and city, asking if new languages are arising, if their uses and practices can be interpreted as clue, sign…, critical issues of new urban imaginary.

Not much research has been carried out so far on imaginary urban in Europe, especially as regards the medium and small cities (see «European Studies» 23 (2006) *Urban Mindscapes of Europe*). Urban policies are based mainly on the physical and socio-economic data, and as regards qualitative, look with interest the

analysis of the needs of citizens and then use surveys on opinions and attitudes (especially stakeholders). An analysis of urban imaginary and related languages can be resources which, if analyzed, could instead act as a catalyst to allow the urban policies to intercept the needs and aspirations of the people.

As in the previous conference we were wondering if there were, in the contemporary world, images just as effective to anticipate the changes taking place through the digital, today also it is impossible not to see how new languages are tightly connected to innovative technologies.

In this sense, the "internet revolution" involves both the ability to connect a growing number of individuals, and the ability to use language that can be simplified by using communication tools for easy accessibility.

As a result of the changes introduced by the network and social media, at least two questions become relevant:

- First, groups of people can communicate more quickly and more easily than in the past, promoting and sharing use of the city and lifestyles (through ICT);

- In second place, this type of information can result of some use to designers and planners in preparing housing solutions.

The connection between innovative techniques of representation and communication possibilities given by the social networks allow the creation of images, easy to communicate, easy to understand, and ultimately more immediate to share.

So the potentiality of local/global communication, conveyed by technologies, takes us into one of the most important aspects of the contemporary city.

The production of information conveyed through digital device by groups of people, shows uses, preferences, ideas, images, leading to shift our focus beyond the physical dimension of urban transformation in the direction of the potential that the network can offer: the most evident result is that the coincidence of cities and communities, urban forms inherited from the past is now in the process of radical transformation.

The Italian geographer Franco Farinelli noticed about this topic, that the city to day is "selective" and therefore discontinuous, fragmented, and therefore inconsistent and not isotropic and, as regards the global city, space and time don't explain almost anything .Furthermore, the appearance of topography, the visible, is a bare from which it derives nothing more plausible and practical about how the world works. Somehow the suggestion arising from this words, is to take in consideration, to re-connect material and immaterial, tangible and intangible aspects of the city and, to conclude, Farinelli sees a kind of brutality in the modern definition of city, made up of collection of things, founded on the distinction between what is material and what is immaterial (see *Geografia. Un'introduzione ai modelli del mondo*, 2003)

In our perspective, urban imaginaries, including media and cultural representations of meanings and memories, are crucial as they emphasize desire, fantasy and they are as important as the built city, the "material", the "real" city…

So this point of view opens interesting sceneries about local realities.

About the issue: "Awareness of differences in taking in consideration "the new urban", I agree with Morgado e Eckardt in the introduction to collective book *Understanding the post- industrial city* (2012), when they affirm: "The efforts of readdressing the concept of urban development and planning is related to a perspective that takes the local particularities into account and hereby addressing a weakness that both post-Fordist and post-modern urban theory, often, is not touching."

So, for this seminar, from our point of view, a key point is:

- How telling, or how representing these local peculiarities and how make this new forms of cities visible?

In our perspective, representation, representations, interpretations, narratives, descriptions are likely to contribute to understand the changes taking place, to seize in the global/local dialectic a new and different need of relationship with the places:

Paradoxically, this is also expressed by digital technologies that more and more from "anywhere, anytime, anyplace" seem to be directed to the "geolocalized information".

I am going to conclude, quoting the words of Jude Bloomfield:
"The memory, history and identity of a city are not the emanation of an enclosed, hermetically sealed, 'pure group' and their past, but the ongoing social construction of people with diverse histories whose lives intersect a specific place. Therefore the urban imaginary is also inherently *intercultural* but located, cosmopolitan but rooted" (see *Researching the Urban Imaginary: Resisting the Erasures of Places*, in «European Studies» cit.).