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URBANISM TODAY: CONVERGING ISSUES FOR A RE-COMPOSITIONAL APPROACH

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Urbanism today: converging issues for a re-compositional approach

1 | Re-composition

A re-compositional problem in planning – for the re-composition of settled urban landscapes – appears when the construction process of the modern industrial city and its own life cycle run out (Secchi, 2005; Bianchetti, 2011) and at the same time a new "exploded" form of the city emerges (Indovina, Fregolent, Savino, 2005; Burdett, Kanai, 2006). In the European urban palimpsest (Corboz, 1985), but not only, this is the shift to a new phase marked by a different urban phenomenon and planning question, and the opening of an original and unprecedented space to rewrite urban territories, according to alternative approaches and attitudes.

A first attitude claims the a-contextuality and episodic, fragmented, and paratactic juxtaposition as distinctive traits of a different contemporaneity and different urban aesthetics and poetics discontinuous from the past. «Its subtext is *fuck* context», Rem Koolhaas reminds us in his phenomenology of the city made by the Bigness (Koolhaas, 1994, p. 89) and then in his aphoristic portraits of the Generic City and Junkspace (Koolhass, 1995; 2001). This way renounces compositional tension as outdated – an anachronism – in a new design climate that chases occasions and opportunities.

On the contrary, a second planning attitude continues to consider as necessary and imagines as possible a different territorial re-structuring by a «composition without models» that «tentatively looks for an alternative to fragmentation» (Gabellini, 2001, pp. 207-209) fostered by "scenarios" and "visions" (Secchi, 2003) able to investigate urban transformation, its sense and possible designed future.

2 | Planning issues

Within this framework the lexicon of urban planning has also been renewed and redefined together with the issues and themes that describe its topicality (Pasqui, 2017). A large part of the contemporary planning debate – possibly more than in the past – is marked by words that tend to become brands, slogans, and "fashionable labels" (Bontje and Musterd, 2012, p. 153), a haunting naming process in which the pregnancy of the very words is often consumed and their sense lost as it happened some years ago with the "omni-landscape" stigmatized by Michael Jakob (2009).

This paper focuses on four terms that speak about contemporary urbanism, stylizes their connection, and highlights the distance they produce from the decades – the 1980s and 1990s – that marked the beginning of this new (re-compositional) phase for urban planning. These four terms are *regeneration*, *resilience*, *shrinkage* and *heritage*. They are not immediately homogeneous but they converge to outline an original coagulation of themes.

Regeneration is an *attitude*, a way in interpreting and delineating the transformative action. Resilience is a *property*, a quality that a system may or may not have. Shrinkage is a *phenomenon*, a process – the outcome of a process – that has affected and is affecting different urban contexts in the world. Finally, heritage is a *concept*, a category to define and collect territorial goods that are recognized valuable legacies and considered as potentialities in their persistence within the territorial palimpsest.

3 | Regeneration

In recent years, regeneration has characterized the debate and practices in urban planning. It should be better to say that it has returned to characterize them because regeneration is not a new word in the city's design and policies. For instance, *Urban Regeneration: A Handbook* by Peter Roberts and Hugh Sykes describes its evolution and differing interpretation from the 1950s to the 1990s (Roberts, 2000).

In this long-term regenerative process, now the phase marked by the transformation and redevelopment of the huge abandoned areas occupied by decommissioned former plants, facilities and infrastructures of the industrial city of the first urban modernity is substantially going to end. The distinctions between "regular" and "exceptional" places of the city, and sites of "extensive" and "intensive" urban transformations – according to typical expressions of the Italian debate that characterized the planning research and practice of the 1980s and shaped a new form of the urban plan – have lost their significance. The protagonist's role of the "large urban project" as the leading tool – *the planning device* – to transform entire wide urban areas through predefined processes in the short-medium term is waning (Lanzani, 2014; Gasparrini, 2014).

Today, regeneration reconnects a heterogeneous plurality of territorial opportunities of different sizes, often tiny and is becoming netlike and incremental, i.e., open to temporary solutions articulated in the involvement of many different stakeholders and players of urban transformation (Chase, Crawford and Kaliski, 2008). It is an open and gradual process that can be uncertain and partial (Gabellini, 2014a). It typically involves the *public space* of the city or the spatial "resources" that could become open space through a project (Fernandez Per and Arpa, 2008; Di Giovanni, 2014); the *welfare space* or the diffused territorial equipment that could be renewed like that (Officina Welfare Space, 2011; Munarin and Tosi, 2014); and the *residential space* of retrofitting housing stock in its different articulations and complementary extensions. Referring to this latter issue, in the collective book *Città pubbliche: linee guida per la riqualificazione urbana* (an outcome and synthesis of important Italian national research) public housing neighbourhoods are described as a potential «regeneration tool», «preferential places for urban policies to reuse and requalify the existing facilities» and «great opportunities to foster paths of spatial and social regeneration with a significant possible impact that can be compared to those that in the recent past characterized the intense phase of redevelopment of the abandoned industrial areas» (Aa.Vv., 2009, p. 21). Regeneration policies for neighbourhoods in crisis is a topic continuously renewed and refreshed. Their spatial/physical and socioeconomic dimensions belong to a long tradition of interventions currently meeting with new criticism of districts labelled *città pubblica* – public social housing complexes for low income people – within the more general crisis of welfare and migration.

All this happens with a progressive tension that looks at regeneration as a possible path for a more "open city" (Rieniets, 2009; 2012) in the reduction of exclusion and inequality towards improved urban conditions and general habitability.

However, within the contemporary regeneration issues there is a further fundamental slant that today characterizes it in a specific way different than in the past. At the end of the evolutionary trajectory described in the above-mentioned *Handbook*, Roberts stresses the shift from a recent past and underscores that «The new challenge for urban regeneration is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development» and «environmental quality» (pp. 28-29).

So, in the Italian context, the 2013 Congress of the National Institute of Urban Planning (Salerno, October 24-26) states urban regeneration is «the central focus around which to redefine a new strategy of action» (Inu, 2013, p. 6). More specifically, «urban regeneration as resilience» is among the three themes selected as salient for the congress debate (Inu, 2013, p. 23).

4 | Resilience

Interpreting resilience as a new frontier of urban regeneration – a term that belongs to many different disciplines but which urban planning borrows first of all from ecology (Colucci, 2012) – means focusing urban planning on environmental issues by overcoming the paradigm of a generic sustainability. Conferring to the settled territories the capacity of a "resistant adaptation" within a general scenario of economic, social and ecological scarcity and crisis represents a new challenge for urban planning and design. «Arriving at *resilience* after invoking urban renewal and redevelopment […], and then *regeneration* […] signals a conceptual tentative run in search of the right words to define more effective operational attitudes in the face of urban transformation […] To regenerate cities and territories adapting ourselves to scarcity […] is a new and tough condition […] In fact it means to assume with conviction the perspective of a new urban form, ecological and productive, by the re-composition of urban archipelagos progressively emerging from the magma of settlement dispersal through the re-cycling of its deteriorated parts, making shrinkage an extraordinary opportunity for re-shaping, reorganizing and adapting» (Gabellini, 2014b, pp. 41-43). In these words that link regeneration and resilience together with the third element of the discourse carried out in this paper – shrinkage – we find the ecological mark of contemporary urbanism interconnected with its capability to deal with waste, deteriorated areas and abandoned spaces according to a perspective of reuse, recycle and re-metabolization (Lanzani, Merlini and Zanfi, 2013).

Therefore, in the re-compositional syntax of contemporary settlements and territories the central structural role of water and open spaces – of *waterscapes* (Shannon *et al.*, 2008) and *ruralscapes* (Bohn, Howe and Viljoen, 2005; Agnoletto and Guerzoni, 2012) – is rediscovered, and the complex, constructional and integrated action played by infrastructure – by the *infrascapes* (Gasparrini, 2003) – is reaffirmed. All this is associated with the recovery potential of *drosscapes* (Berger, 2007) in an urban planning that becomes *ecological urbanism* (Mostafavi and Doherty, 2010) and *landscape urbanism* (Waldeim, 2006), words of a new lexicon that speak about recent research directions in theorizing and practicing the joint of urban and environmental planning in a multi-scalar territorial design (Gasparrini, 2015).

Within this renewed perspective, the practices of a resilience-oriented urbanism solicit bottom/up approaches because they are nourished first of all by a different cultural attitude of local communities and activism of people caring for their own habitat. But on the other hand, they claim and vigorously demand "competences" and "expert knowledge" with a reinforced operational contribution of earth sciences in planning (Berger, 2009).

5 | Shrinkage

Under the definition of shrinkage various manifestations and cases of urban contraction, decline and reduction are collected (Oswalt and Rieniets, 2006). Their variety – in space, over time, in different economic conditions and in the urbanization phases of the diverse contexts where shrinkage signs are recognizable – raises the suspicion that we are not speaking about the same thing, and the term describes extremely varied phenomena depending on different historical and geographical situations. Although «interpreted by some scholars as a new label applied to well-known processes of long duration» (Armondi, 2011, p. 40), and in spite of the somehow non-comparable features of the different cases, as mentioned above, the analytical category of shrinkage has had the merit of focusing and activating a synoptic view on a phenomena set – «the pluralist world of shrinkages» (Haase, Rink and Grossmann, 2014, p. 1521) – that can no longer be dispatched as pauses, accidents or anomalies along growth processes and development trajectories. On the contrary, they are representative of new structural conditions that argue for a different understanding and approach. «In the face of the trauma of a permanent state of crisis, institutions and people initially reacted by means of the traditional economic levers in the attempt to return to growth. Then, after decades of failures […] in the [Rust Belt] cities many people started to believe that this condition of marginality […] is no longer the problem to solve but the great opportunity not to waste» (Coppola, 2012, p. VI).

In the search for a univocal definition of the shrinking city, demographic aspects tend to prevail although this main indicator cannot exhaustively describe its distinctive characteristics. Therefore, shrinkage is defined by those urban entities of significant dimensions that reveal relevant and non-incidental trends of population decrease over a period of at least five years and present a situation of socioeconomic change that tells of a structural crisis.

Another peculiarity in the description and interpretation of shrinkage is a certain circularity of causes and effects. «It is not always straightforward to disentangle causes and effects in a complex process like shrinkage. It is a demanding task to find out "what came first" and "what caused what"» (Bontje and Musterd, 2012, p. 155). With regard to the causes, recalling Oswalt and Rieniets, Bontje and Musterd summarise them in the four categories of *destruction* (wars, natural disasters, epidemic diseases, environmental pollution), *loss* (scarcity of resources, massive job losses), *shifting* and *change* (suburbanization, selective migration, demographic change, economic transformation, institutional change). Among the effects they list the negative consequences – increase of empty and abandoned dwellings, loss of spending power of the remaining people, decline in social services and technical infrastructure decay (in water and energy provision, sewer systems, road infrastructure maintenance) – but also the possible favourable implications – a more relaxed local housing market, less traffic congestion, less pollution – and the explicit policies and planning strategies, sometimes defined as "smart decline" able to look positively at the opportunities offered by shrinkage (Shaw, 2002).

At any rate, according to an urban planning perspective – whatever the demographic, social and economic factors highlighted as causes and effects may be – the specificity of the phenomena of shrinkage is what has been effectively described as a "perforation" of the urban settlement (Armondi, 2011, pp. 40-41; Jessen, 2006; Lütke-Daldrup, 2001): a process that compromises the former spatial way of working of the settlements and issues serious uncertainties and challenges about the re-absorption and re-arrangement of what suddenly has become a relic. In fact, this urban dross – because of its durability and material consistency and resistance interposed between the still vital parts of the settlement – conditions the reorganization and possible recovery of the city.

6 | Heritage

Rather recently, approximately from the early 2000s, after a period of underground or just sectoral attention paid to heritage – i.e., only by preservation specialists – its topics have greatly come to the fore again in the urban planning debate (Bandarin and Van Oers, 2015; Albrecht and Magrin, 2015; Bonfantini, 2015a).

If observed in the long run, reconsidering the European and, more specifically, the Italian planning tradition, the treatment of the "inherited city" tells us of the progressive widening of planning attitudes, techniques and practices oriented to its persistence instead of substitution. So, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the "old city" was mainly described as an obstacle to modernization to be removed. But even then, the necessity to save at least some major elements – the "monuments" – was recognized, and afterwards also some parts of the minor historic urban fabric – the historic "environments" – that envelop those monuments for a full understanding and appreciation of them were recognized as worth protecting. Until around the mid-twentieth century the entire "historic centre" was like a "single unified monument" to be considered as such in its integrity. Then, other "historic" parts of the settlements also external to the ancient urban core were considered – villas and villages, quality garden suburbs, company neighbourhoods, social housing complexes… and finally embracing further diffused elements constitutive of "historic territories" and "landscapes".

The attribute "historic" has worked as a selector of value in a process within which "historic" are also urban materials of a recent – sometimes very recent – past, and yet considered worthy of that definition. Historicizing is the mechanism to promote, for the elements subject to this process, a design attitude oriented to their permanence and persistence. The key to this process typically resides in recognizing "cultural" values of sites – their "civilizational value" – as it emblematically happens, for instance, in the action of Unesco (Unesco, 2016).

However, the risk of this mechanism is the enucleation and isolation of historic urban landscapes from the "current city", above all today in the face of the tendency to transform the valuable traces of the past into thematic parks to sell and consume in the globalized tourist market paradoxically completing the dissolution of the same historic resources being turned into a "monocultural" simulacrum for visitors (Settis, 2014).

Nevertheless, in contemporary urban planning, a second different path to urban historic landscapes is possible (Bandarin and Van Oers, 2015; Guerts and Corten, 2014) if we are able to leverage their potential of resilient urban environments in their typical adaptive flexibility in the multiple articulation of practices and activities that they can host and allow and in their capability of working as "urbanity infrastructure" – like the *blue* and *green infrastructures* promoted by landscape urbanists as the new framework of settled territories (Gasparrini 2015) – to improve habitability (Bonfantini, 2013; 2015b). These spaces are not taken away – i.e., "subtracted" – but intertwined with contemporary cities and territories. They are structural elements of them: vital, open and plural parts of which tourist economy is just one – and not the only – ingredient of vitality.

7 | Planning tools

Hence, regeneration, resilience, shrinkage and heritage converge and define, today, a design perspective for a re-compositional urbanism. At any rate, the synergistic focus on these four issues is not enough for a plan and neither is their "thematization," i.e., their concrete definition in the argumentative construction of a planning question referring to specific contextual conditions. Nor is defining well-tuned targets and specific expected outcomes of the planning action. In fact, between themes

and expected outcomes there is the crucial space of *planning devices* for the project, which bridges the former and the latter, while interrelating and structuring them in the design process.

This essential function is well exemplified by the "ecologies" of Reyner Banham whose 1971 enlightening book about Los Angeles "architecture" has had a recent new edition in 2001 accompanied by an original introduction by Anthony Vidler. Facing a shifty and indefinable city – «that had for many decades defied the attempts of visitors and residents to characterize it in any unified sense» – if not explicitly censored by critics and experts (Vidler, 2001, xvii-xviii) the concept of ecology, as «comprehensible unity» able to interpret and compose the qualifying relations between space and society, geography and history, becomes the hinge – the interpretative device – to provide a grasping and generative understanding of late 1960s Los Angeles.

More recently, commenting on the Structural Plan of Bologna and its seven images of the restructuring process – the so-called Seven Cities (Gabellini, 2008; 2011) – Francesco Infussi stated: «they closely reminded me of Banham's "Four Ecologies" […] However, there is something more in the Seven Cities of Bologna because these are not just the representation of the domains of different local identities, referring to the present and past. This tentative identification is made through the prospect of a possible future that in the ecologies of Banham is not present. They are not only "sections" of current features, but also "projections" of possible and desirable evolutions. This projective dimension seems crucial to me. It is so crucial that the Seven Cities *make* […] *the form of the project*» (Infussi in Bonfantini, 2001, p. 86).

According to this view and approach that interpret and design the contemporary urban phenomenon as a "city of cities" (see Balducci, Fedeli, Pasqui, 2011), an even more recent and somehow surprising example is offered by the urban plan for Matrah (Muscat, Oman), where «the early request made by the client to produce a *zoning* for the area» was taken as the opportunity to unexpectedly produce «a fertile interpretative tool able to address the complexity of the area and to trigger the production of a dynamic urbanistic project […]. The use of an extended notion of ecology, as per Banham's acceptation, enabled the work team to gain a deep comprehension of the project area while providing […] the proper starting point for a 'differently sustainable' urban project. One grounded on the understanding of Matrah's soul and of its six ecologies» (Arici, 2015).

It is clear that "ecologies" in the manner of Banham are only one example of an intensive reflection on the planning devices between themes and expected outcomes. In the Structural Plan of Antwerp (one more instance), this function and role is played by a double toolkit made up of seven "images" that consider the salient features of the city and contextualized issues of the future and five "strategic places", i.e., selective sequences of strategic places for the city's transformation.

On the one hand, in fact, the Structural Plan «creates a vision using a number of images that play a forceful and constructive role in the design of the city. […] The image is a way to take into account a collective imagination in a search for shared goals regarding the city's transformation. Imagination develops images that are the products of envisaging possible trajectories» (Secchi and Viganò, 2009, p. 26).

To be more explicit about their potential and functioning, «images are formidable cognitive and design tools, above and beyond their role as the synthesisers of possible policies and actions. They come into play during the planning processes and are not just representation of its results; they are like search engines giving structure to the investigations, selecting important themes and issues» (*ibidem*).

On the other hand, abandoning «the traditional format of the comprehensive plan that attempts to decide every question in every place the plan adopted […] an ap-

proach [that] tends towards distinct and discrete actions – *strategic projects* – in specific areas – *strategic places* – that can respond to those ambitions and questions considered strategic by the city» (Secchi and Viganò, 2009, p. 6).

Planning devices play a fundamental role in making sense of urban plans and work – non-neutral – in treating the themes and defining the possible outcomes of the planning action.

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URBANISM TODAY: CONVERGING ISSUES FOR A RE-COMPOSITIONAL APPROACH