Urbanistica: differences between languages, focuses and cultures

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In the first chapter of her book *The Power of Places. Urban Landscapes as Public History*, Dolores Hayden tells us about a heated debate between Herbert J. Gans e Ada Louise Huxtable that took place in the Seventies on the pages of the *New York Times*. Gans, a distinguished urban sociologist, attacked New York's Landmarks Preservation Commission, since he thought that the Commission was rewriting New York's architectural history from an elitist perspective, as it mainly tended to preserve mansions of the rich and buildings designed by famous architects. Huxtable, an architecture critic, argued that to define major architectural monuments as product of the rich and to consider attention paid to them as an expression of an elitist cultural policy was a perverse distortion of history. In her opinion these buildings were essential and irreplaceable part of civilization and aesthetic uniqueness was as important as vernacular expression.

Apart from the subject and reasons of the debate, it is interesting to see how both were unable (or unwilling) to understand each other's language. When they spoke about architecture, Gans was intending all the built environment, Huxtable buildings designed by famous architects, and only a very limited part of the built environment. When they said 'vernacular', the former was referring to the social uses of buildings, while the latter to buildings designed by unknown architects. When they said 'neighborhood', the former

meant a complex network of social relations and spatial ties, the latter was ideally drawing a line around a historical district.

Both seemed to share the common concern that Americans were losing important collective memories, due to more or less large scale urban renewal interventions. However, from today's perspective, they also shared an inability to predict that the changed social composition and economic condition of American cities two decades after their debate would involve major controversies about the definition of collective history and collective culture in a democratic society.

I think that a number of contributions published in this issue of the journal induces us to reflect upon the increasing diversity of languages and attentions characterizing the field of activity that in general terms in the Italian tradition is named *urbanistica*. In fact, the report on the project 'One City, Nine Towns' for future development in suburban Shanghai appears very different from the other contributions on policies, plans, projects, practices of urban development included in this issue. It is obviously a difference not only due to the geographical distance and dissimilarity in the processes between the worlds that such articles consider, but also due to the different languages and focuses that distinguish them.

In the Pujiang New Town the vitality producing the reconstruction of Ground Zero, with its intricate web of subjects and powers cannot be noted nor can the urban policies being developed in Cosenza, Salerno, Catania.

Such decision-making processes induce us to shift attention from the 'city' as an object to processes and related outcomes, which are

inevitably uncertain even in short-term action plans. Certainly, the design of new towns has always been an extraordinary (and problematic) field of experimentation for urban planning, even when in the period of greatest expansion of cities and economies in different parts of the world, it seemed to be an unavoidable solution to problems experienced by large cities. Perhaps today it emerges even more dramatically when compared to the forms of planning we are used to, since they are deeply influenced by the pluralistic character of society and by the contrasts and conflicts that affect it. In place of a pluralistic society, which raises not only technical, but also political problems to any design enterprise, in the design of the 'Italian city' of Pujiang by Gregotti Associati the client seems to be making clear requests for spatial and social organization of the town. For example, planners are asked to assign an 'Italian character' to the new town and to propose districts with different typologies corresponding to various income levels. The presence of a single conversation partner seems to facilitate the designer's task, reducing uncertainty about the design's outcomes. What seems to be problematic in the client's demand, is its contradiction with the 'tradition of the Italian historic cities', which was able to favour and merge social and functional differences, as well as the 'new needs of social living'. The solution that emerges seems to lead to a stable spatial order that ensures lack of controversies and conflicts. Space, deprived of social action, seems to be without time. But the way towards the future does not have one direction only, while projects, tending

towards one goal, imply fixity of target and direction leading to it.

Different meanings of *urbanistica* have coexisted for a long time now in planning theory and practice. And the urbanist's activities have been interacting with a more and more intricate accrual of old and new demands made by society. If we focus on practice, we realize that the definition of professional figures included within the field of *urbanistica* cannot be taken for granted. Besides architects specialized in urban design, city engineers, and public officials who occupy positions in municipal planning offices, we find professionals who are not engaged in drawing up any plan (neither regulatory nor strategic). They are, for example, engaged in negotiation, cooperation, resolution of conflicts on urban issues, in plan, project, and policy evaluation, or in building coalitions with the aim of promoting local development (1).

In these cases the variety of theories, beliefs, approaches and languages characterizing urban planning practice comes into play. However, this is not only the consequence of the recent multiplication of the urbanist's profiles and fields of activity, but also the result of a different way of conceiving *urbanistica*. In fact, if we remember Astengo's (1966) (2) reference to the lesson of Geddes, that a village, a city, a region is not only a "place in space", but also a "drama in time", it is difficult to face the project for the 'Italian new town' in Shanghai with a spirit of quiet admiration. The questions that such a largescale project raises are several. We refer to the massive processes of change taking place in China and, in particular, in

the Shanghai region, which Huang's paper only hints at (3).

However, assuming diversity in languages as the only perspective to interpret the contributions in this issue would be limited. Another problematic aspect is that the growth of Chinese cities and the solutions of their related problems seem to show us the sequence of a movie that we have already seen, but with a totally different setting and a much more dramatic scenario. With the opening up of China there has been fast penetration of European and North American ideas and experiences. This fact, also due to the character of ongoing processes in the rapidly developed regions along the eastern coast of China, seems to render what is not contemporary, contemporary. According to Yeh and Wu (1999), "In the field of urban planning, ideas such as Ebenezer Howard's Garden City and Sir Patrick Abercrombie's London Plan are known ... Many planning terms, such as 'new towns', 'green belt', 'growth poles' and 'megalopolis', are widely used …, although some of them are not used exactly and properly."

On the other hand, issues that in wealthy Western countries have been relevant over the past decades, might be completely irrelevant or assume different meanings in China, or in some other 'transitional country', where a gradual and partial process of reform has led to an economic policy characterized by the coexistence of planned and market elements (Wu 2001). And concepts, theories and practices developed within a centralized planning persist in this country and inform its frames and routines, notwithstanding the fact that they are no longer considered adequate in the face of current changes (Yeh, Wu 1999).

Planning is a practice deeply embedded in institutional and political contexts (4). Planning discourses cannot be easily universalized. Planning theories to which they usually refer, rooted in European and North American traditions, underpin ways of thinking that are alien to Asian ones (Friedmann 1998), in spite of the above-mentioned penetration of Western discourses, cultures, practices (5).

Differences in institutions and practices, i.e. in planning cultures are of great importance. They also concern the current European Union member states, and would induce us to reflect upon the outcomes of the diffusion of a 'European policy style' in local territorial action practices in a number of towns in Southern Italy (6). But in order to appreciate the Chinese context it is not enough to understand differences in planning cultures. Any reflection upon the construction of Chinese towns would require not only a translation of discourses, but 'translations between' different rationalities, i.e. a double directionality of translation between cosmologies and macronarratives: between the (modern) European cosmology and the (traditional) Chinese cosmology, between the ideals of participatory democracy and socialist ideals (Mignolo 1999).

Notes

1. Among others, see Rodwin (1989); Friedmann (1998). About the 'new' planning practices relating to the emerging social demands in Italy, see Balducci (1998).

2. Or to the almost contemporary Bolan's (1967, p. 234), "Planning is now viewed as a process … and the master plan is a flexible guide to public policy".

3. A wide discussion on these issues is in Yeh, Wu (1999) and Lin, Wei (2002).

4. See Gerundo and Soda on the effects of the reform for the election of Majors in Salerno and Cosenza respectively. The importance of government policies, socialist institutions, and the urban administrative system for current territorial transformation in China are well documented in literature. Among others, see Wu (2000); Zhang (2000); Ma (2002).

5. The construction of theories seems to be limited by the obligation to give justification to the 'official policies'.

6. See the contribution by Tedesco, which explicitly assumes this point of view. A systematic study on the recent changes in planning practices in a number of European countries that pays due attention to the influence of institutional contexts is in Newman, and Thornley (1996).