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Suburbs: from zenith overlook to eye-level view

Daniele Virgilio

André Corboz concluded his famous essay *Hypercity* by pointing out we can no longer use the terms that normally allow us to describe and understand urban phenomena. This uncertainty, both about the definition and the semantics, seems to be caused by the processes of standardization that characterize the contemporary city and also seems to have produced the loss of meaning of the traditional opposition between 'center' and 'periphery'.

New urban characters and social behaviors show a trend toward making the spatial and symbolic codes of urban settlements more uniform, making different situations and objects appear similar such as, for example, consumer society's 'containers' and pedestrian town centers (Boeri 1999).

The global megalopolis has put an end to the opposition between the inside and the outside of the city, unifying the world into one zone which stands "between nowhere and nowhere" (Foucault 1997). From the analysis of urban structures through a morphological point of view, the study of the changes of urban territories in Italy has shown that the diffused town is not a specific spatial character of urban forms belonging to the borders of towns but rather a behavioral, mental paradigm that unifies compact and sprawling urban dimensions in the same transitional, nomadic practices (Barbieri 1996). A new concept of contemporary space, based on the ideas of transition and flows is changing cultural and perceptual references from 'stability' to 'rapid sequence' (Mello

2001; Boeri 1999), making the run across territories the geographical basis of a new theory of society (Ilardi 1999). Furthermore, the shift from urban growth to urban transformation in contemporary town planning in developed countries has widely demonstrated that conditions of the periphery also belong to downtowns just as much as the features of good urban quality often belong to suburbs (Piroddi 2000).

Even so, though many of these signs seem to imply a new concept of 'suburbs' that of a city scattered in the *continuum* of the global city, and though in representing nowadays the landscapes of metropolis the attention is often mainly put on the sequence and the flowing of the zapping perception from the nomadic viewpoint of freeways, peripheral urban areas seem to keep very peculiar and lively characters, especially if considered from the point of view of everyday life. It is mainly in the suburbs that new forms of social interaction are taking place, as well as the spontaneous transformation of physical environments by groups of residents (Mello 2002; Ilardi 1999). It is in the suburbs that we guess new places for cultural production (Purini 1998). Suburban spaces become, sometimes, the experimental fields of insurgent living practices for new citizenships, whose diffused actions and transformation micro-projects can generate new dimensions of place (Paba 2002).

Terraines vagues are becoming new laboratories for social and cultural innovations, even by means of illegal and conflictual practices, as a factor of the destruction of established urban order (Ilardi 2002). Suburbs' vitality is not detached from the interpretation of suburban

landscape as an expression of discordance and chaos, unmasking the violence and the pathology partly concealed by the self-celebrating aesthetics of official urban scenery as well as showing the creativity coming from the inhabitants' sometimes rather utopian wish to become a 'town' (La Cecla 2000). This condition becomes more evident when watched from the inhabitants' point of view. For these reasons "starting from the borders" seems to be an interesting approach to understand the nature of the city and to forecast a new urban identity (Maciocco 2001). The initial phrase in J.F. Lyotard's *Suburbs* (1997): "One has to come into a town from the suburbs", seems to suggest a strategy of deciphering a town from its periphery to its center. Also, this cognitive strategy has a certain similarity with Geddes' approach in experiencing planning in India, when Geddes (in Ferraro, 1998) refers to the opportunity of approaching a town's problems from the periphery towards the inside. The suggestion we expect from that is to reassemble the sense and the vital connections of urban identities (an often ambiguous and non-objective idea: "we think of our identity when we are not sure of our belonging", Bauman says) starting from the feeble signs which constitute, at the urban borders, a background of diffused relationships, developing a point of view from the universe of the inhabitants' everyday life.

An approach to the 'weak town'

On the one hand new urban forms are chaotic and on the other hand the traditional idea of city based on the uniqueness of urbs and civitas in a holistic subject has completely

vanished. Suburbs are the lively scenery of this negative complexity, the borderline where an uncertain identity seems to be a prelude to new possibilities (Decandia 2000). A possible approach to learning and interpreting the meaning of the city is that of starting from the places where the traditional elements of the idea of urban identity are not intelligible, deciphering the micro-phenomena belonging to the inhabitants' landscape, which are considered by conventional plans like background noise. In front of the apparent world's destruction, a knowledge project cannot but start from an elementarist move: "trying again to name the things that make the city and territory and show their change" (Viganò 1999). One must try to 'reconstruct the world' by understanding the connections of its fragments, not to nostalgically re-establish a hypothetical order but to develop the specific, original character of the suburbs' identity, starting from a sort of 'zero degree' to imply the preliminary release from any learned language to adopt the 'spoken' language of everyday life. The first action of this kind of approach is the drafting of an inventory of minimal facts, by surveying elementary distinctions even before we can recognize a structure, making a sort of survey about the objects and their relations, both physical and symbolic, which make suburban landscape. First of all, trying to decipher the diffused multiplicity of individual and collective micro-projects connected with the inhabitants' lives, to forecast, afterwards, a hypothesis for a representation within a complex and systemic pattern. We have to produce first what is so

obvious in everyday life experience of the city that has been forgotten and then even 'censored' in the grammar of planning, proceeding from ordinary things, which are never banal but more likely the result of complex phenomena and selective syntheses (Besio 1995), and trying to understand what has become incomprehensible by working in homology with the typological and morphological inventory of the hypercity as suggested by Corboz. Starting from these premises, in the following pages we will describe an experiment of observation of the inhabitants' world looking ahead to the, interrupted and hidden, horizon of the continuity between people and places.

Representations

The representation of the city in planning has been traditionally dominated by a 'zenith overlook', implying a vision of reality from afar and from an infinite height. Patrizia Gabellini has focused on the planimetric mode of representation as a support for an allseeing look, with a two-dimensional way of drawing which tends to neutralize the holistic character of the world, emphasizing more the metric and economic features of space than perception of space (Gabellini 1996). The overlook of the planimetric vision seems to be directive, absolute, and selective. Louis Marin says that the zenith point of view is dominant but it is not situated in a specific place: it is everywhere and nowhere. The plan has absolute power, deciding what can and cannot be represented (Marin 2001). It is from these premises that the rational approach of planning, through the zenith-overlook representation, becomes

predominant in the other forms of knowledge and representation, causing the final separation between man and environment (Decandia 2000). Also, this reductive side of planning is emphasized by zoning as a tool of analysis and design. Its way of representing by areas tends to replace the complex and manifold nature of reality with a uniform composition based on the quantitative and functional aspects of spatial phenomena. Similar problems seem to characterize the culturalist vision, whose attention is focused on the architecture of the urban phenomena, more on the morphological analysis of spatial objects than on the connections, often unforeseeable, which construct the relational nature of reality. It seems that the conflict between the two traditions of European urban planning, the one focused on the objects, more mechanistic, and the other on the relations, based on development and participation, is still unresolved (Kroll 2001). The inadequacy of the zenith-view approach to urban phenomena can be evaluated on two sides: the inability of interpreting new urban phenomena, especially as to the city-region characteristics, whose flowing cannot be represented by Euclidean geometries, with a perimeter of separate parts (Gabellini 1996; Boeri 1997); the 'censorship' of the effects of the physical interaction between the inhabitants and their spaces (La Cecla 2000). The zenith-view cannot interpret the inner nature of the inhabitants' world, its vitality and its richness of signs that a conventional map cannot express. The aim of the research seems then to be that of an experimental construction of a way of knowledge and representation based on the

need of approaching the inhabitants' point of view and of focusing on the signs of everyday life: a way of expressing the spatial images of the inhabitants with a common sense language, putting in evidence the network of connections making the structure of living space. These are not new questions in planning, as they were part of the planner's aim in using an iconic language in plans in the early 1980s (Gabellini 1996). Photography has a main role in the approach we now suggest, because it emphasizes the shifting of the point of view from the zenith to man's height. Photography can be the instrument to portray the spatial vision the inhabitants have of their territory, of their fragments of everyday life, to show the way they reorganize the image of the city (Leotta 2000), representing things with a common sense language. Photography has an immediate ability to show the irrefutable presence of things, to be a sort of certificate of the part of reality it portrays 'in the flesh': though being tendentious, it can lie on the meaning of the thing portrayed, but never about its existence (Barthes 1980). Photography always implies being in a place: the 'seeing' of the photographer lies in the fact 'he was there' (Barthes 1980) with his/her physical presence, creating a "living connection", according to an expression by Merleau-Ponty, between the subject of knowledge and the world. Also, this is the basis for the development of an empathic link with places and people, beyond the limits of the modern approach. This recalls the method suggested by Geddes, that of "watching by walking through" with camera and notebook as a deep and complex way of

approaching the knowledge of the city, to decipher the place's identity and to unveil the "heritage", that Geddes defined as the deep essence of the collective soul, lying in urban spaces (Ferraro, 1998). Photography allows, then, the creation of an interaction between the observer, the inhabitants, and their places, so that he/she cannot be an outside watcher.

A complex view of the inhabitants' space

In the construction of knowledge, photography is the instrument to record, from a person's height point of view, differences and recurring phenomena in the inhabitants' space in suburbs. But beyond the 'elemental' step represented by the survey a further one is that of reorganizing the elements within a complex conceptual framework based, in this view, on the representation models of the "ecology of the human settlement" (Besio 1999). The hypothesis is that in a chaotic condition such as that of suburban territories it is still possible to identify unitary spheres which can be defined through the interpretation of local spatial connections and interdependences between the elements of the inhabitants' landscape: a spatial configuration based on a syntax putting in evidence the structure of the context in which the inhabitants' organize their lives. The attempt, based on what has already been experienced in the rural and periurban context (Besio 1995, 1999), is that of reconstructing an idea of a local system that can figure the links between the different parts of the inhabitants' space of life starting from the elemental rules of spatial organization, interpreted as recurring phenomena in different contexts and represented

according to the inhabitants' point of view. The main theoretical references are to Lynch (1990) for the construction of a normative theory based on common sense, to Alexander (1977, 1979) for the linguistic codification of the interaction between the different components of human settlements as a result of a multiplicity of individual actions within a common language, and to Muratori, especially for the holistic and organicist interpretation of the settlements' structure, even if this one is characterized by a rather deterministic view (Naddeo 1998). In previous research experiences the definition of a local system have been that of "minimal territorial units significant as to the behavior of local communities". Minimal life connections build up (and keep alive) forms of organization of local space maintaining their individuality: the criterion by which it is possible to identify these minimal units is that of understanding the structure of the smallest part of territory in which an organization can be surveyed, in which the interaction between different phenomena of everyday experience shows considerable recurrences (Besio 1995). Experiences developed in the periurban domain have led to define this model as "structurally and functionally non-homogeneous organic parts of urban territory, with which the inhabitants identify themselves", a "neighborhood in which the actions of everyday life take place", in which the objects which are part of the collective memory are the significant elements of identification and in which residences, commercial activities, paths and parks are connected both from the use and the perceptual point of view (Besio 1999).

On this basis we can identify (or even re-discover) a subdivision of the suburban continuum in a polycentric system made of "small cities within the larger city" to integrate the small with the large dimension (Colarossi 2002; Frattini 2000). The spatial setting of the model is based on two elements: center and border, which identify a settlement as 'to settle' means to find a place in the vagueness of space (La Cecla 1993). To find a place according to the significance that can be recognized in a territorial sphere from the inhabitants' point of view is, again, the main question of the analysis of suburbs. It is a question that remains unsolved, hanging between two opposites: the dismissal of concepts like "identity", "belonging", and "territory" (Scandurra 2001) and the searching for a sense of proportionality in the relation between people and places (Paba 1998).

The suburbs of La Spezia
The experiment refers to the suburbs of La Spezia and stems from the work done for the master plan of the town (by Luciano Pontuale and Federico Oliva), and has been developed as a doctoral thesis. Starting from a morphologic analysis of the built landscape of suburbs, the aim is to elaborate a representation of a system of local units as an expression of the multiple identities hidden in the borders of the town. The context is an unexplored field, with a high-density of residents and heterogeneous from the typological-morphological point of view. There are environmental threats, such as a power station, a spur road, a double railway line, a port area in conflict with the dwellers' spaces, traffic congestion. There is no 'euphoria': no shopping centers, no malls.

Marginality dominates. The reconstruction of the idea of a local system of settlement proceeds from a photographic survey of recurring phenomena, interpreted as rules in the organization of space, elemental and obvious, that can be recognized in different contexts of the same suburban sphere. It is possible to organize an inventory of these rules, even before trying to detect and represent the connections and the interdependence that generates the small organized local units. First, with the survey of morphology, interpreted as the form of urban space in the small dimension (Colarossi 1999): there is always a distinction between enclosed and open spaces, the first being those created by two continuous sides of buildings along a main road in the metropolitan area, enclosing a public space, the second being the typical 'pavilion-system' way of land occupation, in which buildings are placed in the central part of their lot. There are always 'planned' fabrics, identified by the regular geometry of their spaces, set near the small enclosed spaces. There are main roads, axes of the structure of local space. There are borders, some physical, as a viaduct, some less obvious, as the decrease of a density gradient. There are small public buildings and spaces (a church, a collective space). There are the signs of history and culture of the places: place names, which are a strong sign of belonging, as well as their reelaboration in the writing practices, sometimes to express the awareness by local groups of being different from the rest of the town, or rather a conflictual protagonism against environmental threats. There are always historic

buildings, those built before the Second World War, often concentrating in the above mentioned "enclosed" spaces. There are always little monuments: memorial plaques, statues, objects that form some sort of affective pole in the everyday environment. There are specific uses: in the "enclosed" spaces, at the ground floors of the buildings, there are often shops, small offices, workshops; the concomitant presence of the form of enclosed spaces, of the historic buildings, and of these mixed specific uses identifies a small, microcosmic local center, as recognized by the inhabitants. Also, from the use point of view, there are always obvious signs of social life, often in spontaneous and ever changing ways of organization: a small club, a row of chairs, a pavement. There are always natural and rural remnants: a little stream often flows near the small local centers; residual spaces are often used as small kitchen gardens, which do not represent an improper intrusion of the country in urban territory, but are rather projects of domestic microlandscapes. There are always areas of 'artificial nature': parks, gardens. The territorial dimension, interpreted as the perception of self-location within the region, is represented by visual landmarks: a factory chimney, a freeway, an industrial area. From the photographic inventory, a further step is that of the reorganization of the different rules of recurring phenomena within a structural framework representing their connections and interdependences organized according to the relation between centers and borders. The various structures of the local units are represented with

synthetic maps gathering ideograms and photos to express the rules of organization of the local units. These forms of iconic and symbolic representation can be seen as a "background vision" (Piroddi 1999), an interpretative model of the possible spatial organization of each little city, as also a simulacrum of the local settlement's structure, a sort of DNA of local space (Purini 2000): a mandala of suburban places, representing a possible firmness in uncertainty and a prophecy for future developments (Rykwert 2002). The detection of local systems in the territory and their representation imply the possibility of defining, in the suburban continuum, the discontinuous and non-homogeneous structure of various local identities, starting from common sense experience of urban space. Possible developments of this method are the definition of a model for the interpretation of local dimension in suburbs, to enhance and facilitate participation practices, to direct the urban renewal planning practices to a coevolutionary approach, to overcome the 'horror' of letting people govern their own way of living (La Cecla 2000).

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