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## Experiences and representations of design for living (of project for dwelling)

Mariolina Besio

"I am often irritated with certain colleagues because they seem to me incapable of appreciating the difference between the obvious and the profound" (Bateson 1977). When the industrial city finishes its cycle of expansion, the attention of urban planning turns to address the forgotten places, previously outside the interests of the discipline; the old city centers and the countryside become the spaces of "rehabilitation", of "reuse", of "redevelopment", of "re-evaluation" (Clementi 2002; Gasparini, Latini 1997; Lanzani, Fedeli 2004; Palermo, Savoldi 2002). In response to this renewed interest, I had the opportunity to participate in three urban planning projects during the years spanning from the end of the 1980s into the beginning of the 1990s that were particularly innovative for that time. The first experience involved a few communities of eastern Liguria in the years between 1986 and 1989. The environmental features were typical of the Apennines: the abandonment of agriculture was accompanied by a demographic decrease and by social and economic marginalization. Promoted by a spontaneous association of more than ten communities, the project was a landscape plan proposed as an alternative to that which the regional administration had drawn up in compliance with the Galasso law (national law no. 431/85, on preservation of areas of relevant environmental value). The scope was that of making an indepth comparison with

the regional plan during the phase of receiving the formal comments from the inhabitants (Besio 1989). The second experience took place in the early 1990s in the Cinque Terre area of eastern Liguria, where the landscape is characterized by the terracing of the land for vineyards. The project, promoted by the winegrowers' cooperative of the Cinque Terre, was a *Programma Integrato Mediterraneo* (PIM, or Integrated Mediterranean Program), that involved the rehabilitation of the rural buildings surrounding the Sanctuary of Madonna of Montenero. It was drafted with the participation of the numerous members that owned agricultural property (Besio 1995). The third experience developed in the years from 1989 to 1999 in the historic center of Genoa. The urban environment was characterized not only by its architectural merits but also by the values of a civic identity of a human dimension. The project was a *Programma Organico di Intervento* (POI, or Organic Program of Intervention), that involved the recuperation of an area surrounding Piazza Vigne, and was promoted and drafted by some of the neighborhood associations (Besio 1999). In all of these cases, from the very beginning there was an awareness on the part of the local community and its inhabitants that the deterioration was social and civil, and not only architectural and territorial. The images of physical degradation were perceived as pathologies of a malaise whose nature was anthropological and civil. In these conditions the local communities and their inhabitants promoted projects for the protection of the landscape and for the rehabilitation of the historic city different from those having precedence drawn

up by the urban planners working in the public administrations concerned (Besio 2001). The first difference regarded the procedure of formation, with a form of subsidiarity common to each of the different experiences; the decision-making system was innovative when compared to well-established methods, since a bottom up process was activated which was not widespread in Italy during the years in which these projects were advanced (Alexander 1977, 1979; Balducci 1992; Bookchin 1989; Forester 1989; Geddes 1970; Kropotkin 1982; Krumholz, Clavel 1994; Lynch 1967; Maciocco 1995; Magnaghi 1990; 2000; Muratori 1967; Sachs 1981; Toesca 1984). A second difference regarded the participants having a claim in the realization of the projects: the residents were considered responsible for the betterment of the environment which they occupied, on account of their identification with the places in which they lived; the design parameters made reference to the experiences of everyday life and the economic dimension called into play factors that were not exclusively assessable in monetary terms; the resources involved were not only those of an architectural heritage or of the financial assets to invest in the works, but human resources as well were also taken into account (Seravalli 1999, 2002). A third difference regarded the evaluation of the current state and representations of the future: the images of the old center, brought up in the meetings, in the public assemblies, and in the analyses of the inhabitants, revealed a situation very different from that represented in the documents prepared by

experts and technicians; in the mental images of the inhabitants of the Vara valley and of Cinque Terre the landscape had the significance of a collective project in continuous evolution, consolidated through the mutual bonds of belonging between the communities and the places in which they lived; the term 'identity' did not correspond to an abstract reality or to a literary metaphor, since the links between the people and the land were codified in the materiality of the possession of the fields or the houses (Aragona 2000; Bauman 2003; Castells 2003; Flanagan 1998; Levi-Strauss 1996; Morin 2002; Sen 2000; Sennett 1999; Decandia 2002). The experiences made evident that established planning instruments were inadequate to represent the evaluations and mental images which the inhabitants formulated for their own living environment. Perhaps for this reason they did not consider the social, economic, and civil processes while the projects of the inhabitants proposed the integration of building interventions with those of environmental redevelopment and of civil responsibility (Ferraro 1998; Jonas 1993; Toesca 1994).

### Representations

"Reality would seem transparent to that which represented it. Naively we think to establish a direct relationship with it. We should, instead, distrust this fable and know that there is an enormous labor to the origins of representations, since we represent reality by making use of instruments, enframing it, establishing differences, utilizing all of the means of language" (Cauquelin 2000). The above mentioned experiences had common elements on which it was worthwhile to reflect. For

this reason, subsequently, a theoretical research was addressed to the relationships between scientific knowledge and 'common sense'. It involved the exploration of the possibility of analyzing common sense knowledge with the help of innovative scientific means, made available by disciplines that in recent times had been involved with this topic (Besio 2002).

Common sense knowledge and scientific knowledge have different methods of constructing mental images of the world and of reasoning. Representations generated by common sense are valid only in the single local situation: their recognition allows understanding the deep meaning of each place, but they do not have universal value and are not generalizable (Frixione 1994, 2002). They tend to be conservative and to construct models that are handed down by 'tradition' (Alexander 1977, 1979; Habraken 1998). What seem to be limits and errors in the light of scientific logic are instead forms of awareness structured to extremely high levels that express rich and articulate expectations and hopes about the world (Betti 2002; Vaccari 2002).

Today we have to recognize that 'unaffected knowledge' is also a heritage just as important as the historical cultural heritage of built property.

Common sense knowing possesses an empirical authority regarding the comprehension of the nature of good building techniques, in which we notice a refined environmental and ecological awareness, having the naturalness and the spontaneity of things 'unsaid' because they are 'obvious'. The questions emerging from these first theoretical reflections were

faced in a subsequent applied research: how to decode the common sense way of knowing that in the past had contributed to give form to the territory and to foster mental images of the landscape; how to formalize the awareness and the representations of common sense according to a town planning language adequate to promote dialogue between technicians and inhabitants.

The scheme of a project is imprinted on the territory, realized in a preindustrial age but still operating, that has integrated the contributions of individuals in a singular structure. The mental image of a structure appears through the landscape, in which coexist nature, history, and the gaze of the people that have worked there. The knowledge necessary to bring about the structure does not come first, but is formed together with it. In the circular relationship between action and knowledge, a 'latent project' lies dormant in the territory and an 'implicit plan' is developed in which is accumulated the knowledge for activating evernew actions. The 'latent project' and the 'implicit plan' correspond to an ecosystem sui generis, called an "ecosystem of the rural settlement" since at its center is the community of people that have inhabited it (Bateson 2000; Lynch 1981; Magnaghi 2000). The 'latent design' refers to a space and time dimension different from that habitually considered in the urban planning project. The actions that have given form to the 'implicit plan' were not provided for in a unique initial design, nor were they completed at the same time. In traditional history, that we are habituated to consider as planners, time unwinds at a constant velocity, regulated by the conventions of the calendar,

that is external to the territory and is the same to all territories and for all communities. By considering history instead as an 'operating structure' of the 'design in process' the speed of time is not constant, but is measured by the rhythm and events of the life of the community (Muratori 1967; Campari 1997; Papagno 2000, 2002).

The 'implicit plan' operates on the basis of knowledge acquired by experience; the 'latent design' is manifested in a space that has a larger number of dimensions with respect to the two dimensions of traditional town planning projects. In the third dimension there are the natural processes governed by the law of gravity, that conditions water balance and soil conditions, and determines the differences in the microclimate. In the third dimension are also perceived the perspective images and the panoramic views of the landscape. But there are other dimensions that explain the meanings and the values attributed to the visible forms of the cultural and civil systems: these consider the situation from different perspectives and project it in spaces that to the three dimensions add other dimensions of meanings attributed by the filters with which the situation is observed (Morin 2001; Longo 1998). They may be given diverse versions of the same reality; the same phenomena may be evaluated differently if they are seen from the inside or the outside. The things that one sees are the same, but the framework of relations and of meanings that connect them changes, no longer giving back to us a composition of images as it represents the different world views that underlie them. From different points of observation one even has different projections of the

future. The representations operate in a multi-dimensional space in which the 'objective' elements of the territory coexist with the observer, the point of view from which the observer observes coexists with the cultural and cognitive models that act as filters of observation.

In representations and interpretations there is always a deformation: we cannot continue acting as if this were not so.

### Urban figures

"In contrast to reason, the imaginary does not open to exactness or to verisimilitude: it is only a vector of contemplation that puts one in communication with the others. The mental image is relative, in the sense that it does not claim an absolute, but puts in relation ... The materiality of a place is crossed by a series of collective images that give it sense" (Maffessoli 1996).

The reflections that guided the research were kept in equilibrium with a double contradiction. In one way they analyzed common sense knowledge to codify it in the technical language of town planning. In another way they sought the traces of a stable means of dwelling, considering change as an unavoidable condition of the contemporary age (Raffestin 1984; Sacks 1986; La Cecla 1993; Mitchell 1995; Vattimo 1998; Bauman 1999; Salomone 1999; Magnaghi 2000). The terms 'dwelling' and 'stability' have assumed, nevertheless, particular meanings that warrant elaboration. The meaning of dwelling has profoundly changed today with respect to the past: one no longer lives in one place for her/his whole life; one is able to live simultaneously in many places, where part of a lifetime, of a year, of a

week, even of a single day, is spent (La Cecla 1993; Magnaghi 1996; Immerfal 1998; Bauman 2001). Stability does not mean to fix the relationships between inhabitants and the places in which they live permanently in time and space. In the age in which mobility and change constitute the dominant condition, such meaning is not pertinent. Nevertheless, even in conditions of high mobility and change, the condition of dwelling characterizes the only relatively stable 'ecological' relationship between people and the urban and territorial places in which their lives unfold (Park 1967, Maffessoli 1996). The ongoing change in the urban situation was addressed in different research endeavors and extensively studied by many authors (Dunford, Kafkals 1992; Clementi, Dematteis, Palermo 1996; Hall 1997; Giddens 2000). New forms of settlement have expanded urban space according to architectural and building structures that are antithetical and at the same time coexistent with each other (Boeri et al. 1993; Boscacci, Camagni 1994; Maffessoli 1996; Basilico, Boeri 1997; Camagni 1999; Martinotti 2002; Maciocco, Pittaluga 2003). Simultaneously with the broadening of space, we assist in the multiplication of rhythms and in the acceleration of time. Activities that formerly took place in sequence can be practiced contemporaneously; ways of living that corresponded to different evolutionary phases of the history of civilization are now coexistent in a system of relationships that connect them globally (Bonfiglioli 1990). The 'empty' space interposed between one city and another is refilled with

great infrastructures, onto which face the out-of-scale volumes of tertiary industry: malls, office districts, entertainment centers. The isolated monuments of the religion of consumerism and of mythical immaterial production, together with the highways connecting them to the traditional city, have occupied the countryside, reorganizing the rural world according to typically urban activities and relations. The dimension of the global city spreads in a generalized manner over the whole planet the macroarchitecture of commerce, of entertainment, of the supranational representativeness of financial enterprise, confirming the same models of urban functioning. The originality of languages and of architectural forms serves to conceal the validating uniformity of ways of life. But it is also the dimension in which is propagated the social styles and images that seek to render ethnic groups, civilizations, and cultures homogeneous (Scandurra 1997, 2001; Sassen 2002; Frattini 2000; Colarossi, Frattini 2001; Mattogno 2002). Seizing the opportunity of technologies of telecommunication, even the minute dimensions of the house, of the work of the individual and of small groups, are extended across the countryside according to diffusive, interstitial, and areal forms. If considered in single units the dimension is imperceptible, but considered comprehensively, the effects are considerable. The dimension of living space and the speed of time, linked to daily life, persist, even if in forms different from those of the past, together in the space and time of globality. The new global rhythms have

not cancelled the rhythms of days that continue to regulate in different places the organization of diverse communities. Contemporary urban forms break the unity of time and space of the modern city. Urban figures function simultaneously, while still having different dimensions of space and speeds of time. The two measures, of time and space, are not alternatives but interweave reciprocal relationships, not juxtaposed but coexistent even if it is not always easy to distinguish the one from the other. Different paradigms are brought together in describing them, without being mutually exclusive. The models that they propose are not closed and self-sufficient, but prefigure mental images and representations that make evident the dynamics of the one, rather than those of the other (Ilardi 1999; Maciocco, Tagliagambe 1997; Magnaghi 2000). Yet even if they are coexistent, the two images are not interchangeable. Each of them requires appropriate forms of knowledge and particular styles of research. One cannot pass with impunity from one to the other without confusing the truths that justify them, and the diverse ethical and esthetic contexts to which they make reference. Theories, methods, instruments, images, styles utilized for formulating effective representations are necessarily different (Berlin et al. 1990; Ricoeur 1992; Longo 1998). The case studies and the theoretical reflections which have been addressed fall within the figure of design for dwelling, of the ordering of space and of the forms of the landscape to draw attention to the life of people in communities, to the interaction through the 'daily rituals' and with the

'common story'. These things are not neutral, since there is the risk that the citizens will be increasingly excluded from the construction of the city (and of the territory), and of losing the collective vision of that which is good and that which is bad for everyone (or almost everyone).

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