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Women's views of the transformation of the city. A research workshop Gisella Bassanini

The idea of forming a workshop dedicated to the relationship between women's cultures, gender differences and the city within the research area on Urban Time Policies and Mobility directed by Sandra Bonfiglioli originated from a few considerations summarised briefly here. The subject of 'women and the city' relates to a variety of subjects, areas of thought and intervention which bring different cultures and sensibilities, responsibilities and roles into play. The orientations that emerged from studies and projects promoted by women have contributed to enrich the field of analysis of the city since the end of the 1980's. These are theories and practices that involve the idea of the city itself, that interrogate urban space that has been transformed and generated by design, that investigate the participation and contribution of women in urban life and the management of it, bring out the dimension of gender relations and instances connected with the practice of differences and promote initiatives designed to guarantee full citizenship rights and to support equal gender opportunities in local development. There is an increasingly more numerous presence of women who put the issue of the 'citizenship of women and the quality of urban life' at the centre of their thinking and action. They do it as public administrators or politicians, as professionals or academics, as individual citizens or in groups. Urban plans and policies have been born over the years, taken root and spread thanks to the support and promotion of women's movements. The case of

urban time policies is emblematic of this and there is a vast literature on this new phenomenon.

The subjects connected with women's cultures are addressed with a variety of methodological approaches by different scientific communities which adopt gender differences as an issue and point of view, thereby moving further the borders and broadening an area which is no longer perceived as a 'question which regards the female world only', but the whole of society.

The viewpoint and the method

A conception of gender as a social practice or as something which is formed in the interaction between individuals has recently made considerable headway. The focus is on gendering processes, which is to say on how gender is constituted, how it redefines and implements continuous forms of negotiation in relations and interaction with other females and males. It is another key to interpretation which looks not only at what men and women are but also at what they say and do.

This theoretical assumption and attitude to the way of observing processes and how they unfold is also that which animated the experience of the Vanda Group at the Polytechnic of Milan of which I formed part. When the Vanda Group started to reflect on the city in the 1990's, on which model of urban civilisation to bring into the world, it didn't imagine a city of women and a city for women, but on the contrary it promoted the idea of a city as a 'city of the two', of the many peoples: a place of hospitality and people relating to each other. We were aware that "thinking of the city with relationships as the starting point makes the difference and directs us to

see the surrounding freedom and to live with dignity in our cities". This is the approach that the workshop, *Women's cultures and urban planning* intends to use and promote: the objective is not to trace a "presumed feminism" but to trace figures, plans, contributions, thoughts and practices in research, in critical literature and in dialogue with different experiences produced on the theme of "women and the city" for the creation of a true "city of the two".

Women's cultures, gender differences and projects for the city

Two examples can be cited to demonstrate the vastness of the subjects and the variety of the constituent elements of which the report "women and the city" and the relative debate is formed: the international conference *Women and the city. Strategies and best practices for the future* (Impresa Cooperazione Donna, Milan, 28th February 2003) and the seminar '*Urbana*', *looking at the city through gender and generations* (Fondazione Michelucci and Municipality of Fiesole, Fiesole, 7th March 2003).

In these two cases too, however, there was little presence and investigation of the contribution of women to urban planning. There is a need to start research projects and intervention on this subject which calls the disciplines of architecture and urban planning directly into play. This failure is also reported in the document *The City, citizenship and gender. European charter for women in the city researchaction* (1994-95) funded by the Unit for Equal Opportunities of the European Commission DG V: "The gender dimension applied to the city must be admitted as the source of a new shared culture involved in the formulation of a new

philosophy of urban and regional planning... Women are absent or particularly invisible at all decision making levels and above all in the decisions that create and generate cities, dwelling and planning. There is a sort of 'double exclusion' of the majority of women: as users of cities and as producers of urban plans and architectural design... The degree of presence of women is one of the lowest in requests for urban, regional and housing planning... Urban planning is one of the greatest challenges at the dawn of the twenty first century".