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2.2 Re-thinking the city through strategic urban projects

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Preliminary reflections on the nature of the strategic urban project

In Europe the experience of urban design, in its best expressions, has highlighted three different operative levels tightly bound to each other. First of all, the definition of a program through which to interpret the political, economic and operative will of the different actors -both private and public-, followed by the launch of policies aiming at creating consensus; equally important are the reflections and experimentations about the rules of urban construction; last, but not least, communicative and consensus-building strategies are to be pointed out for projects dealing with big communities and various actors and interests (Portas, 1998). Obviously, urban projects acquire meaning and legitimacy if included in wider strategies concerning the future of a city. Very briefly, we might say that urban projects are structured around two axes: one concerning the “process”, with all its socio-economic and cultural implications, and the second one concerning the “morphology” and so the control of physical space.

Considering the results that many Italian cities have achieved through programs of urban re-qualification, during these past few decades, some recurring elements appear. The first is an idea of an urban re-qualification so wide that it can include any intervention operating with the logic of “building replacement”. It has often happened that obvious mistakes made during the process of urban planning were considered as operations of urban re-qualification, in cases of ordinary and questionable projects in terms of design and urban relationships and accessibility. A second element can be found in the weakness -if not lack- of a public direction ca-

pable of creating, and also pretending, standards of quality tied to urban and landscape peculiarities of every investigated context. Basically, the lack of a well-structured reflection on the features of the specific urban landscapes has led to the construction of “re-qualified” city areas that are expressions of a very low urban quality and complexity. Practicing city planning through the instrument of “urban project” (Masbungi 2001) requires, most of all, a capability in managing the processes of transformation and negotiation with private actors and local communities, guaranteeing scheduled timings to the operators, but also requiring high standards of urban quality. It also requires the creation of a vision able to detect the issues and legitimate these transformation processes, fostering the common good (of the city and its citizens) instead of peculiar and private interests.

Manuel de Sola Morales (1989) defines “urban project” as a process through which we can reflect on urban geography and work on the city’s complexity, instead of focusing on its structural simplification through an inductive procedure “generalizing what is peculiar, strategic, local, generative”. Let’s clear the field from any ambiguity that urban project represents a simple extension of the rules of architectural design at a wider scale. Architectural design is an objective representation of reality, while urban project defines a process and not an object. Urban project deals with relationships, capable of defining both flexibility and strictness; it allows a careful project direction to guarantee the variety and quality of urban morphology. Claiming the work on urban morphology as a

fundamental component of the urban project process does not mean designing strict urban plans, but to define a framework, a grid that could also accommodate what today still appears undefined.

Nowadays, a reflection on the “urban project” as an operative instrument of urban planning cannot avoid reflecting on the dynamics that are concerning our cities and their transformations, especially in those areas characterized by massive urban sprawl. Such processes are progressively changing the physical and social geography of many ancient European regions, starting to consolidate new diffused urban areas made by groups of linear settlements facing the road, interchanging historical centers, low density towns, productive areas and light industrial plants, infrastructural spaces, etc...

In 1968 Ludovico Quaroni raised, in a very sharp and lucid way, the issue of the new dimension of the city. “The city will no longer be clearly identifiable in a “built” as opposed to a “non-built” entity, in a walled-up continuum as opposed to the green emptiness of the countryside”. According to the roman architect, the city will become an urban landscape without clear boundaries; such a characteristic will not allow it any more to be considered a compact element, but its structure will have to be conceived as a combination of various different parts. Which shape and articulation can the urban space assume in a context affected by such dynamics? If the principles of overlaying and stratification have driven the construction of the historic city, today the model we can find in the “territorial city” seems to be a random combination of different buildings. Such trend, leading to morphological simplification, highlights some questions about the designing approach. For instance, if we are going towards the obsolescence of the city as a compact structure and the consolidation of a broad territorial urbanization, which characteristics are to be defined within this new form of urbanity? Does the use of morphology -as a project category- still makes sense if we are moving inside a “city of objects”? Which role to attribute to urban public spaces in physical and functional relationships that are to be established among the most densely built areas of our cities, sub-urban, natural and rural areas? Let’s try to give some answers.

Undoubtedly “open space”, in order to become a structural factor of the “territorial city”, will have to assume more and more the characters of a system of integrated spaces, able to connect the compact city to the surrounding areas, strengthening urban relationships at different scales through the intervention on rural

landscapes and pathways, waterways and dismantled productive areas. The great fragmentation of the contemporary city is one of the consequences of the overcoming of individual needs of urban space, no longer compatible with the promiscuity of the historic cities or with their accessibility issues. We are talking about a “shape” and a “morphology” that need to be able to interpret this fragmentation, not re-proposing grotesques imitations of the historic city -to which a certain architectural revival has accustomed us-, but experimenting new balances between built and empty spaces, new meanings and spatial articulations that can measure themselves with the issues of urban discontinuity. Debating about the “discontinuous city” already means to question oneself on a context in which urban (built) areas and natural (empty) ones might define a framework of connections capable of producing a complex system, linking together the diversities deriving from the nature of its structuring parts, as Edgar Morin (1992) reminds us.

In such perspective, the urban project becomes a tool of re-interpreting the historic urban structure as well as the site’s morphological features (the city geography of which de Sola Morales talks about) and of enhancing the value of discontinuity through the interaction of different elements of the landscape. The contemporary city project requires a deep comprehension of the processes of urban transformation and the acknowledgment of the historical relevance of fractures and discontinuities within such processes. Coherently, the urban project will have to be based on a skillful articulation of sequences and pauses, edges and frames, urban fabric and new architectural icons.

(Italian to English translation by Elena Dorato)

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