

CULTURE HUNGERS: NEW APPETITES FOR CONTEMPORARY CITIES

Serena Maioli

DYSFUNCTIONAL ABUNDANCE

The city is an egg (Price, 1961). The ancient city, hemmed in the physical line of the walls and made up of an historical core, is a boiled egg: we are able to distinguish the borders and its density. During the centuries of industrialization and demographic boom, the city begins to develop itself beyond the walls, taking the form of a fried egg: the periphery is born. The city centre, up to now solid on the core, loses its magnetic force and infects itself with an urban magma which floods everything dissolving hierarchies: the modern city become scrambled. Despite Price's model, our cities entered a new phase, one in which growth and the blending of centres and periphery brings about a new phenomenon of erosion and blurring: it causes the emptying of entire urban parts, towards a porous islands' city model (Ungers, 1977).

We are living in redundant spaces, unfinished or unplanned, revealing a stopped growing process: we are talking about vacant spaces or, more often, completed spaces with function but without sense. We can define those spaces 'urban lacunas'; they are protagonists in the loss of meaning of the whole work which is the city. Is abandonment a symptom of crisis or the result of a natural selection? We cannot continue categorizing shrinkage as a contemporary wound or a sign of decline; rather, we have to admit it is the expression of latent social behaviours and economic trends which bring us to reconsider quantity and quality of the space.

The emptying scenario is a topic in the debate among local community and hyper-community (political and economic), two opposite fronts both for aims and kind of space use. To understand the reasons of shrinkage we have to observe how people meet, how they eat, what they buy, how long they live in public space or in private: substantially, it's time to study the culture space capable of synthesizing the identity of a bigger de-territorialized community.

NOTHING IS REALLY ADAPTIVE BUT CULTURE

[...]The city must actually create new appetites, new hungers - not solve problems. The architecture is too slow to solve problems.

Culture is a cluster of ideas almost impossible to merge: it's the set of mental qualities (knowledge and beliefs) and behaviours features (customs and traditions) which are expressed by human displays such as art or ethic. Moreover, culture is a social legacy achieved by populations during

the centuries by the strengthened relationships among individuals, groups, countries; culture is the product of ethnicities. Talking about culture in urban planning means listening to changes in society: culture is the way people react to poverty; the way they define hierarchies and limits among public and private sector. It is made by the myths we invent and by the trends we follow.

Why, then, do we need to investigate the regenerating potentialities of culture in the shrinking city? The reasons why towns are reshaping their spaces results from a friction between the ambitions of the growth-oriented economic model and its social externalities on using urban and rural areas.

Studying this context we are able to understand how to steer the urban agenda: culture becomes a survey-tool, much like a magnifying glass, but also a development strategy which enables the translation of phenomenological codes into technical learning and vice versa.

Culture presents the chance to transform social experiences into urban experiences and to tie up again the lost relationship between people and places.

The arrhythmia between city and urban life is one of the first causes of urban decay and derived by its inability to engender sense of belonging and identification: the breaking-off between community life and space produces unconcern in the best case scenario and social exclusion in the worst one.

The life cycle of a building, a district or a park, starting from planning until its demise is much slower than the social time which is capable of creating innovations, of broadcasting impulses and trends, activating exchanges among people every minute. The time-planning of urban scale has to follow the culture road trying to outguess cultural transformations.

To understand how the city creates culture and how culture becomes praxis and symbolic representation of society, we need to study the so-called soft infrastructures as the relational and information resources of the city (Branzi, 2006). New fields of study may help urban planning in ordering complexity and in showing how we perceive space (environmental psychology), how we interact with it (interactive design) and how we communicate thanks to the urban space (communication).

Cultural tools: environmental psychology

There is a deep gap between the city we plan and the city we live in. Which spaces do we live in and which ones make us feel good or express safety, energy, excitement, calmness or daze? The environmental psychology measures the effect of the physical environment on the individuals and the community well-being.

Wellbeing has come into the technical vocabulary of architects, planners and governors: it is a complex condition which involves senses, expectations, attitudes and it depends on the particular context and reference culture. The sense of well-being is influenced by measurable facts as lighting and noise, smell and proximity to obstacles, but its perception is eminently subjective and derives from the interweaving of mental attitudes and social interaction.

The acceptance of a refurbishment project by the local community is strictly dependent on the quality of the urban condition or situation generated, on the skilful mix of surprise and reassurance: the synergy between new intervention and place identity and history, that is actually its widespread culture, gives to the project one more chance to succeed.

Querying on the dynamics of flows and places to stop, we can understand why some spaces have been preferred to others and, afterwards, what is the method to activate the shrunk spaces of the city.

Cultural tools: interactive design

The interaction design, as a quite distant subject from urban planning, both for applications and work tools, may be considered extemporaneous: however, it has been born with similar aims than those of urban design and it uses work's methods that follow the same direction of the culture-based approach to planning so far enunciate.

This design branch deals, in fact, with the analysis of interactions between man and computer devices with the purpose of generating market products fulfilling as much as possible human necessities, always considering a specific context. Interface, usability, interaction define the relationship between users and machines (Stenson and Scharmen, 2012).

During the design process, from idea to product, we can observe an interesting method used to evaluate the responses of the interactive object to the user's needs: the first phase involves a market and target research, which is followed by the idea's conceptualization into some specific solutions. The most important part of the process, however, is the realization of a prototype that gives a quick and low-cost feedback on the acceptability of the product.

If we define the urban spaces as one interface within, and of, communities, is it possible to plan their interaction with the citizen's needs? The cities' architecture is not only physical planning of space, but the definition of its dynamic relationships with people: to combine the world web potentialities with the ones of the real geography not only do we have to create interactive maps of the city but also to promote interactive and narrative cities. Our cities need to be narrated: a space storytelling, capable to highlight the functionality and the responses of the land to the change in time and uses, giving the citizens a constant feedback on the political urban decisions.

Cultural tools: communication

The future cities have to take charge of an important task: to increase the imagination of local communities, enabling them to learn patternthinking. Today the cities talk through road signs, commercials, lighting and neon signs; they talk about happiness, desire and possession addressing themselves to the individuals rather than to the whole community.

The urban communication turns out to be as much important as urban planning in the new-born media age: cities have to seize the opportunity of branding themselves, developing communication strategies to present themselves as attractive.

First of all, we need to focus people's attention on the abandoned places of the city, on the fragile and marginal dots keen to be brought back to the urban storytelling. A new crisis-communication has to evolve, responsive to the critical events, capable of involving local and external stakeholders in regeneration projects: crisis may be interpreted as signs of change and, because of it, there become the ideal settings in which to create new scenarios.

The public space is the stage of urban communication and the governors have to spend time and resources on reshaping it, in order to improve the relationship between local government and civil society actors.

AVANT-GARDE

Back to visibility

During the Five Days of Milan in 1848, the street fighting against the Austrian monopoly has put side-by-side a multitude of Milanese revolutionaries, coming from different social and cultural ranks, to claim for a common identity and land that once had been usurped from them.

In May 2012 something happened in Milan which, not being comparable to the independence fight, took its origin from same desire reclaim back a lost piece of land and identity: the ten days occupation of the Galfa Tower by artists and intellectuals reveals the demands of a large and creative social group, focusing their attention on wealth, spaces and visibility redistribution; confinement and exclusion from the labour market and urban life were the reasons which brought the Art's workers association to outline the perspective of a cultural resurgence.

If we think that social inclusion starts from the sense of belonging to our places, we can easily explain the Art's workers choice to occupy a vacant skyscraper located in the city centre, in order to give strength and visibility to their cultural protest.

The Galfa Tower bears the name of the two streets which it overlooks, Galvani and Fara streets: after serving as a base for an oil company and, from the fifties on, the base of the Banca Popolare di Milano, since 2006 the tower belongs to SAI, an insurance company; ever since, the skyscraper with its thirty-one abandoned floors is still looking for a renovation.

Why have they occupied the Galfa Tower instead of a place already programmed to accommodate cultural activities? According to some young participants, culture cannot stay enclosed in the usual institutional borders but must overrun other spaces. The Art's workers criticized the way Milan produces cultural events like the EXPO 2015, which is capable of attracting huge masses of consumers but, simultaneously, requiring large investments in new built up areas and reinforcing socio-spatial fragmentations and inequalities: the slick showcase of the most recent regenerative plans and models of Milan actually seems to use the same vocabulary of previous concepts and visions, for instance the theme of green and greenery as the city panacea and the inevitable concrete employ in order to claim the design victory.

In this context, the occupation of the Galfa Tower reveals a desire to come out of the dark, social magma of the city; beyond this gesture there is the hope to give visibility to social and urban issues: social atomization and urban shrinkage.

The skyscraper isn't just an icon of capitalism, building speculation and the culture of the urban standard: as GiòPonti said, the Galfa Tower is the symbol of Milanese industriousness and widespread energy of the city (Ponti, 1961).

Macao is the name chosen to reinforce the project branding: the association's network allowed a cross-communication through the web and informed the Internet users about the experiences collected, debates, propositions and news. The occupation led to the discovery of an abandoned world, in order to reshape it and to get back producing culture. Different working groups organized video installations and architecture workshops in order to fit out the interiors; events planning to attract people and artistic announcements to involve citizens all over the world in building a new community of professionals. Macao seemed to be a collective and inclusive demonstration in which different fields of culture (literary, design, art, music and many other) and different social ranks collaborated.

The failure of Macao came on the tenth day with the order to evacuate the Galfa Tower rooms: the institutional legality continues prevailing against illegal and explosive creativity. Macao doesn't stop, however, and moves to the public space, from the new-born Macao Plaza to Piazza Duomo trying to reorganize a new committee. What will its future be? Is Macao searching for a space in which it could come true or are the abandoned places in the city desiring for the arrival of a project like Macao?

The main critical point of this kind of demonstration against a complex system of institutionalized values is the impossibility to embed them into society: they haven't been

interiorized as being part of the collective culture yet. The reason they blossom is the same of their failure: the detachment between urban planning and urban sub-culture. All that we can get from this Italian experience cannot be seen as an accomplished fact because it is still not accepted as taking part of our conscious imaginary, but the beginning of a trend: the trial of a bottom-up undertaking without any planned intervention by politicians and technicians. The groundbreaking boost for an urban change and for the transformation of inner structures (market, production, social relationships) comes again from the creative part of the society.

In the interview given in the 2011 during the 'Festival dellamente' in Sarzana, Zygmunt Baumann said:

'Every majority, historically, is born from a minority. [...] We call them minorities but they are not inactive. They don't appear in the statistical boards, for this reason we don't notice them. However, I'm quite persuaded that, somewhere in the world, some alternative programs of action are coming out.'

A city caused by learning

The Potteries Thinkbelt is born as a taunt, during an half architectural half institutional conversation between Cedric Price and the British Ministry of Education, Lord Kennet. The meaning of education in the contemporary age and its physical display in the city was the crucial theme of the discussion: according to Price's statements, education infrastructure represents better than others the paradox of an architecture out of phase despite the social evolution. Is it still possible to learn the world's properties and at the same time to invent new worlds when knowledge is kept within brick fortresses?

Cedric Price doesn't think so and defies Lord Kennet to look back at its role as governor and key decision-maker on British education policies.

Price: 'Why don't you really think about what education is about, what learning is about? How people access it?'

Lord Kennet: 'If you are so clever, why don't you do it?'

Price: 'I bloody well will, then.'

Access is the key-word we should focus on to understand the creative sparkle that brought Price to the conceptualization of the Thinkbelt. The access to learning includes many meanings: first of all, it refers to physical access, through infrastructure, of students to learning facilities; secondly, access refers to how young people embrace, on a daily basis, an educational career, their dynamic interactions, the way they experience knowledge and produce it. Today, the access is overall connected to the virtual linkage or the possibility to network people and information all together. Price considers the students as one of the most dynamic social groups due to their adaptability and reactivity. But the place in which they have to perform their creativity appears paradoxically static, introspective and stiff: they live in a space which is unsuitable to host any change.

The Thinkbelt project uses an abandoned railway as a networking catalyst for an urban settlement in which industrial activities have been replaced by production of knowledge. Rem Koolhaas notices that Price's project deals with the theme of 'the derelict' or 'the ruin' that preserves a vital sparkle inside itself: Price finds in ruins the essence he needs to start a transformation process (Koolhaas, 2004). The ruin has lost the epochs' images and remains as a sign of the landscape in its deep sense, deprived of the ornaments time has put on it. It's a track, a

stop or an interchange point: it loses the exterior skin but not the capacity to generate situations. The rails and the rail-tools are used for moving and transferring prefab classrooms, laboratories, storages and services: as in a giant dockyard, three hub-stations allow the moving of containers with different functions through the use of a crane, depending on the needs.

Those transfer areas, Pitts Hill, Madeley and Meir set up a triangle of local infrastructure connected to the regional ones in which the housing areas are located. The housing blocks are also made of prefab units which can be assembled in four different ways according to specific site conditions.

Price thinks that the mobile learning, as well as the dynamic management of learning facilities, could spark off positive reactions: the project would encourage flexibility and enable experimentation; in order to boost them, he decides to build from the beginning only ephemeral and adaptable architectures.

At the base of the settlement strategy of the Thinkbelt, Price grants free access to learning in a way that would become the starting point for creating a new industrial class as a driving force of the country.

Price believes in the virtuous synergy of tangible and intangible production enhanced by the physical connection of the railway networks.

From the knowledge cathedral to the Potteries' containers there is a huge conceptual leap of monumentality: the building loses its symbolic centrality and becomes one of the knots of a complex web in which the link itself rises to the rank of monument. The project deals with the first signs of industrial decline which led, in the following years, to the progressive abandonment of industrial and tertiary areas: Cedric Price, sooner than other artists and technicians, understood the potential of dispersal as an opportunity to build a new landscape, an information landscape. The Thinkbeltrail-scape merges and crosses the architectural and the geographical disciplinary corpus, using terms related to geography such as limit, dimension, coordinates.

To the question 'is it necessary to build?' Price answers with a certainty: enabling is better than building. Thus, if we would like to see a contemporary appropriation of Price's statements, we should shift our attention from city planning to interactive design: Thinkbelt is one the very first cases of interaction design because it sets up synergies between man, computer devices and architecture. The output of an interactive design process could be defined as a plan of interfaces rather than a physical building project: it turns away from the idea of formal representative architecture. The evolutionary nature of architecture and city's forms brings us to two different considerations: first of all, architecture could keep on living if they it results capable of adapting in time; secondly, if architecture cannot adapt itself, landscape will transform it into its original (in the sense of non-historical) configuration. All we can learn from Price's lesson is the capacity to fit in the change under way and encourage it. The peculiar open-endedness of his model, even if strongly critical, does not fight against capitalism effects, rather it elicits from the fail of capitalism the strengths to build a new idea of learning-society. He doesn't criticize mass culture: on the contrary, he desires that such trend causes the spread of creative sparkles, qualifying and connecting them exponentially through networks.

Rules and roles

Macao and the Potteries Thinkbelt haven't been brought to completion because of the political situation and the urban rules they had to interact with: the final aim of this culture planning essay is to understand how these kind of projects could be set up in our towns and which values,

methods and tools we can get from them in order to define new political lines for the regeneration of shrunk parts of our cities.

First of all we see what new behaviour patterns rise from the urban projects so far analysed: the collective accountability, the free access to information and cultural production, the extending of the participation in planning despite the hierarchical and top-down urban planning, the design of change against that one for an immobile present. These new behaviour rules involve taking a positive account of change and the concept of adaptability: first of all adaptability of functions to needs (i.e. human-oriented design), then adaptability of architecture to functions (i.e. flexibility); a growing fluency of expertise among disciplines; finally the city needs urban policies to be changeable in time, instead to be rigid and self-referring.

The two above mentioned projects enunciate several methods:

Professional diversity and/or multi-disciplinarity requires and enables a new mind-set (artistic, creative, user-oriented, narrative) on how to solve urban problems: seeing the same issues from different perspectives helps in making projects suitable for future needs and users.

The strategic use of infrastructures as the only fixed systems for the connection of mobile structures permits not to plan the urban settlement a priori, but to make it pliant.

Using the computer to monitor and update projects and plans supervising its functionality and its social responsiveness.

An open-design method which enhances the unfinished as a condition for incremental improvement: from a prototype (or micro-interventions) to more complex settlements which have both time and ability to settle in the city being appropriated by people.

In order to reach adaptability in planning, some new practical tools have to involve the field of urban education ¹, social research and a penetrating review of the regulatory frameworks urban growth management strategies.

Training and inclusion of new professionals in planning is outstanding: in a competitive city the scientific and the technical expertise has to be assisted by social sciences and by artistic disciplines. Artists, sociologists, psychologists, technicians and building surveyors, engineers and designers have to confront each other in order to have a global vision of their cities and to steer its constant changing. In addition to this, we have to improve creative communities as indicators of the breaking point in our societies: they are a visible social thermometer which directs the trends and defines future scenarios.

Ultimately, our cities have to train crisis managers, that is, coordinators able to manage cyclical crises not as dramatic and isolated events but as a structuring feature of modernity.

The transition from our growth-oriented urbanism to a planned de-growth control requires strategic, slim and fast plans, able to offer long-term city visions: these plans design diagrammatic solutions, economical direction, but first of all a set of cultural ideas for the city.

Which behaviours have to be encouraged in order to fill the gap between shrinkage and hyper-urbanization?

Which kinds of places allow them to establish?

We have to devise a building evaluation system which isn't based on square meters only, but instead on the energy amount and natural resources consumed by buildings, on the quality and flexibility of their spaces, on the efficiency of the infrastructures which serve them.

1 See, as example, the experiences driven by CUP (the Center for Urban Pedagogy, based in New York). <http://welcometocup.org/>

The methods so far analysed can be applied to other contexts keeping in mind that culture can't be outsourced and set randomly; otherwise we could lose its authenticity and reciprocity between society and its urban project.

However, it's possible to underline common features between different territorial systems.

The interactive settlement of the Potteries Thinkbelt could be applied easily into the European urban agglomeration or metropolitan regions: the Dutch Randstad, the Baltic region, the hyper Milanese region or even some less known and smaller territories such as the Emilia-Romagna region in Italy, which is formed by a series of small strongly connected industrial knots.

To develop such network plans, based on technological innovation and on advanced idea of knowledge economy, means to aim at urban density on one side, and to material and immaterial infrastructure on the other: the localization doesn't influence anymore the investors choices, and for this reason these territories have to focus on the cultural vision, first, and then on the technical project. In this sense, infrastructures have to be the channels through which people can flow across the territories, boosting local identities without forgetting to connect them.

Finally, experiences such as Macao can be defined as micro-interventions which often do not involve the whole city but just one abandoned building. The effort of mapping abandonment in our cities enables not to isolate Macao as a single event, but to reinforce it through a widespread know-how: isolated territories cannot face the 'big effects' of our economic stagnation, rather linking experiences, expertise and citizens each other would empower communities self-determining.

CONCLUSIONS

The possible must become more important than the probable. (Price, 1968)

The city is an open-work in which the main actors are the communities: for this, it cannot be bounded as built-up space but should express itself through it when the shrunk, fragmented, arid space gets back its cultural value. The urban is intrinsically connected to social conditions, to political themes of legality and public works, to economical issue of employment: the city is actually society, policy and economy itself. As long as urban planning remains sectorial and driven by standards or forcedly visionary but with no relation to local cultures, a widespread displeasure will cause the place's abandonment, social distress and conflict.

Cultural planning immerses the city in a virtuous circle, or better a spiral of ascending development: the never ending spiral continuously re-sets its own direction without coming back to the origin. In the same way planning processes culturally oriented consider the spatial needs as the results of relationship developing in time, nor in a linear neither in a cyclical sequence of events, but in a spiral idea of progress.

115

References

- Branzi, A. (2006) *Modernità debole e diffusa. Il mondo del progetto all'inizio del XXI secolo*, Milan: Skira Editore.
- De Solà-Morales M. (2009) *Public spaces, collective spaces*, in Avermaete T., Havik K., Teerds H. (2009) *Architectural positions. On architecture, modernity and the public sphere*, Amsterdam: Sun Publisher.
- Ferguson F. (2006) *Talking cities: the micropolitics of urban space*, Berlin: Birkhauser.
- Meroni A. edited by (2007) *Creative communities | People inventing sustainable ways of living*,

Milan: EdizioniPOLI.design.

Price, C., Obrist, H.U., Isozaki, A., Keiler, P., Koolhaas, R. (2000) Re: CP, Bael-Boston-Berlin: Birkhäuser.

Ungers, O. M., Koolhaas, R. (2012) The City in the City – Berlin: A Green Archipelago, Berlin: Lars Müller Publishers.

Wright Steenson, M., Scharmen, F. (2012) L'architettura deve interagire, Domusweb June 2011.

Macao project: <http://www.macao.mi.it>

Exhibition 'Cedric Price: Think the Unthinkable exhibition', created by Architecture+Design Scotland and shown at The Lighthouse in 2011: <http://ads.org.uk/ms/access/cedric/index.html>