

WHAT DO CITIES REALLY NEED TO (RE)GENERATE? RE-CONCEPTUALIZING URBAN REGENERATION PRACTICES AS “GRAFTS”.

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Abstract

Extensive and complex dynamics are affecting urban contexts, radically altering the physical form, social relations and the use of space of the European city as we knew it. Often, both formal dis-organization and fragmentary social relationships change the perception of the “urban”, particularly in the peripheries. The concept of “contemporary suburb” has different meanings; today it refers to different realities, including empty spaces, incomplete and/or unfinished places lacking identity.

In my view, however, these “fuzzy” spaces can lead to a return to the City, or better to a renewed concept of the urban, based on the neighbourhood as a “minimum unit” of urbanity.

I will start here from two considerations: 1) the lack of urban quality and of those elements able to construct identity in the city formation process; 2) a diffuse sense of “rootlessness and alienation” which is perceived much often in the new peripheries. This is part of my PhD research, dedicated to understanding which are the most important design elements able to build new urbanity, quality and identity, in contexts increasingly more fragmented and inhomogeneous.

In this perspective, I proposed the concept of urban “grafts” - borrowed by agronomy, to re conceptualize development in contemporary cities. “Urban grafts” include both tangible and intangible elements as source of compatible and sustainable (re)generation, able to integrate the new within a living organism, influencing the morphogenesis of the urban space, as well as the chances to improve social interactions.

Keywords: Contemporary Urban Transformation and Peripheries, Neighbourhood, “Urban Grafts”.

1. Introduction

This paper would like to propose part of my Ph.D. research about the development of the contemporary City and especially on the reconceptualization of the spatial and social dimension in the neighbourhoods. The sudden changes in the European urban context, and also the economic, social and technological transformations have led to a reconfiguration of space and time lived in cities. The contemporary urban space is increasingly characterized by complexities, changes and specialized aspects. The intensity of these changes leads to review two fundamental components of urban living: the space and the social relations.

It’s necessary to find a renewed concept of the urban quality and a “sense of belonging” and local identity. What features and projects or processes can be taken to renew this?

My PhD research has been working on three keywords: the “urban grafts”; the peripheries of the contemporary city; the neighbourhood. These topics are considered key elements for a process of urban regeneration. I have introduced the concept of “urban grafts”, borrowed by agronomy, to re-conceptualize development in neighbourhood and contemporary peripheries.

I submitted this paper in the track about “urban design quality and its social dimension”, because I believe that it’s necessary to review a model of urban development, from the size and morphology of the neighbourhood as a “minimum unit” of urbanity.

2. The components / elements of the contemporary city that we need to work on.

This essay examines the concept of an urban (re)generation, recovering the “concept of neighbourhood” and improving the relationship between morphology, quality and local identity.

Below I would like to express some considerations about the relationship between the lack of urban quality and a diffuse sense of “rootlessness and alienation” which is perceived much often in the new peripheries of European contemporary cities.

The research question is whether it’s possible to (re)configure unfinished urban spaces and suburbs in liveable and recognizable neighbourhoods.

I want to consider the practice of “urban regeneration” as both a process and an outcome, a response to decline or degeneration. Urban regeneration is defined as << the transformation of a place showing signs of morphological, environmental, social and economic decline or, rather, as the infusion of new vitality to communities and places in decline, through long-term and sustainable improvements to the quality of local life >> (Evans, Shaw, 2004).

In this perspective, I am proposing the concept of “urban grafts” to revitalize, to renew, as well as in agronomy, an urban place/neighbourhood and also a community.

This paper confirms, also, the concept of urban design as << an art of making places for people...it concerns the connections between people and places, processes and urban form...>>.

Moreover the features of urban design reflects the values of society, the perceptions and aesthetics of the urban environment. Thinking about quality and identity during the whole development planning process, it’s the best way to promote successful and sustainable (re)generation and “place-making”. If the contemporary City is considered as a “complex and self-produced” organism, it’s necessary to look at all local dynamics which can condition the morphogenesis of the urban space.

2.1 “Urban Grafts”: join together to (re)generate and to improve neighbourhoods.

Today, in the contemporary European cities, many urban transformations are oriented toward “micro” (Indovina, 2008, pp.8-9).

Local programs and regeneration projects neighbourhoods are numerous and there are careful studies of new urban transformations, but most contemporary European city have a standardized development, without recognizable features, a globalized urban context that often creates monotony or even an alienating effect for citizens.

It’s, therefore, necessary to identify possible components, by me defined “urban grafts”, that are able to “join” to the context for activate and improve the processes of physical and training identity, especially in the suburbs where they have never formed or were interrupted.

The use of “urban grafts” can address the urban planning, influencing the place morphology and also people interactions in the intermediate size of the neighbourhood.

In the contemporary urban space, so increasingly fragmented and chaotic, many people are looking for a “sense of identification” with the environment in which they live. Then you must also working on the concept of “community planning” for a social cohesion and vision of the City as a common resource.

The research has developed through a “qualitative” and experimental methodology. I chose to use a “place-based approach”, based on the characteristics of the territory and, in contexts already consistent, you can choose an “area based approach”, to recognize the local strengths or weaknesses. I also decided to use an approach “people based”, referring to people who live or use the neighbourhood and addressed the active participation of citizens.

The proposed methodology is to describe, analyse and compare a series of incomplete and/or unfinished places lacking identity from the perspective of their deficiencies through the identification of grafting functions.

I have developed a matrix, a graphic representation of the relations between the different urban contexts and some characters and functions of the proposed “urban grafts”. The evaluation of certain planning practices, in Europe in recent years, as case-studies develops a number of examples that can be as models for the understanding of my research of “grafts”. The functions of the “grafts” may be multiple (to reactivate, to correct, to organize, to regulate the development, to regenerate, to give identity...), improving the condition unsuitable.

I believe that these “grafts” have three main issues on which we can work:

- Physical Space (related to morphological characters, the structural elements and criteria of the urban)
- Socio-Economic (linked to the social, cultural, economic, and participation of local identities)
- Intangible (the expression of “a sense of community”, the promotions and activations of citizenship)

The research aims to explore the main components and dynamics of the contemporary city, especially about both physical structure than identity of neighbourhood.

I’m interested to understand the capability of this “urban grafts” as an opportunity for urban transformation and to propose some conclusions with implications for planning.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, in this paper, I would like to express that the contemporary European urban peripheral areas, only through “compatible and sustainable urban grafts”, can go back to being quality spaces joining the ability to “city developing” and a good “community planning/building”. So the search could be continued on the analyse of the database and of some particular case of need and practices as examples, to find not an ideal model and the perfect neighbourhood or the “lost community”, rather of identifying those components, can improve the grafted context and better address the urban transformation.

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